In hoc
signo
vinces
Francis Berry Homan Mulock
Bellair.

To dear Ethel Mulock

from the Author.

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GERARD

OR

THE WORLD, THE FLESH, AND THE DEVIL

A Novel

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET," "VIXEN," "ISHMAEL,"
"THE DAY WILL COME"

ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.

LONDON
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GERARD;

OR,

THE WORLD, THE FLESH, AND THE DEVIL.

CHAPTER I.

"I LOOK DOWN TO HIS FEET, BUT THAT'S A FABLE."

THERE were low brooding clouds and a feeling of thunder in the air as Gerard Hillersdon's cab rattled along the King's Road, past squalid slums and shabby gentilities, towards quiet rural Parson's Green. Only a few years ago Parson's Green had still some pretension to rusticity. Where now the speculating builders' streets and terraces stretch right and left in hollow squares and close battalions, there were fine old Georgian and pre-Georgian mansions, and stately sweeps of lawn and shrubbery, and

avenues of old-world growth, shutting out the hum and hubbub of the great city.

To one of those respectable old mansions, that one which was second only to Peterborough House in the extent and dignity of its surroundings, Gerard Hillersdon was driving under the heavy sky of a July afternoon, the lowering close of a sunless and oppressive day. Never, not even in mid-winter, had the smoke-curtain hung lower over London than it hung to-day, and if the idea of fog seemed impossible in July there at least prevailed that mysterious condition of the atmosphere, commonly known as "blight," a thick yellow haze, unpierced by a single sun-ray.

To Gerard Hillersdon, ordinarily the most sensitive of men, the atmosphere on this particular afternoon made no difference. He had got beyond that point in which atmosphere can raise a man's spirits or depress them. He had made up his mind upon the great question of life or death; and this kind of day seemed as good to him as any other, since he meant it to be his last day upon earth. He had made up his mind that life and he must part company; that for

him at least life was not worth living: thus the grey and yellow of the atmosphere, and the threatening thunder-clouds to windward suited his temper far better than the blue sky and west wind which Lady Fridoline would have desired for her garden-party.

Incongruous as the thing may seem the young man was going to spend his last earthly afternoon at Lady Fridoline's garden-party; but for a man utterly without religious feeling or hope in the Hereafter such a finish to existence seemed as good as any other. He could not devote his last hours in preparing for the world that was to come after death, as he had no belief in any such world. To him the deed that was to be done before midnight meant swift, sudden extinction, the end of all things for him, Gerard Hillersdon. The curtain which was to fall upon the tragedy of his life to-night would rise upon no afterpiece. The only question which he had taken into serious consideration was the mode and manner of his death. He had made up his mind about that. His revolver was lying in its case in his lodging-house bedroom, under the shadow of St. James's Church, ready loaded—a six-shooter. He

had made no will, for he had nothing to leave behind him, except a heavy burden of debt. He had not yet made up his mind whether to write an explanatory letter to the father he had sorely tried, and a brief farewell to the mother who fondly loved him, and whom he loved almost as fondly; or whether it were not better to leave only silence.

Not in sheer frivolity was he rattling along the road to Parson's Green. He had a stronger motive in going to Fridoline House than the desire to get rid of his last afternoon in the bustle and excitement of a herd of idle people. There would be some one there most likely whom he ardently desired to meet, were it but to touch her hand and say good night—good night for ever—as she stepped into her carriage, or were it but for one little smile across the crowd.

She had told him only the night before, sitting out a waltz in the tropical heat of a staircase in Grosvenor Square, that she meant to be at Lady Fridoline's *omnium gatherum*.

"One meets such queer people," she said, with the regulation insolence, "I would not miss Lady Fridoline's Zoological Varieties for worlds."

A feather blown across her pathway might be enough to divert her fancy into another channel. He knew her well enough to know that there was no such thing as certainty where she was concerned; but on the off chance he went to Parson's Green, and his eye ran eagerly along the double line of carriages, looking for Mrs. Champion's liveries.

Yes, it was there, the barouche with its sober colouring, and the men in their dark brown coats, black velvet breeches, and silk stockings, and the fine upstanding Cleveland bays, strong enough to pull a Carter-Patterson van, yet with enough breeding for beauty. Wealth expressed itself here in that chastened form which education has imposed even upon the cit. The money that had bought that perfect equipage had all been made amidst the steam and din of the Stock Exchange, but the carriage and its appointments were every whit as perfect as those of her Grace of Uplandshire, which stood next in the rank.

She was there—the woman he wanted to see and speak with on this his last day.

"I am coming, my love, my sweet," he muttered to himself, as he wrote his name in

the big book in the hall, the record by which Lady Fridoline was able to find out how many strangers and outsiders had been imposed upon her hospitality in the shape of friends' friends.

The crowd was tremendous; the house and grounds buzzed with voices, through which from the bosquet yonder cut the sharp twanging notes of a Tyrolese Volkslied, accompanied on the Streichzither; while from an inner drawing-room sounded the long-drawn chords of a violin attacking a sonata by De Beriot. On the left of the great square hall was the dining-room filled with a gormandising crowd; and on the lawn outside there was a subsidiary buffet under a pollarded Spanish chestnut which spread its rugged venerable limbs over a wide circle of turf, and made a low-roofed tent of leaves that fluttered and shivered in the sultry atmosphere.

Every class was represented at Lady Fridoline's garden-party; or rather it might be said that everybody in London whom any one could care to see was to be found on her ladyship's lawn or was to be hunted for in her ladyship's extensive shrubberies. Literature and the Stage were not more conspicuous than Church and Bar—Church

represented by its most famous preachers, Bar by its most notorious advocates, to say nothing of a strong contingent of popular curates and clever stuff gowns.

Every noteworthy arrival from the great world of English-speaking people across the Atlantic was to be seen at Lady Fridoline's, from the scholar and enthusiast who had written seven octavo volumes to prove that Don Juan was the joint work of Byron's valet, Fletcher, and the Countess Guiccioli, to the miniature soubrette, the idol of New York, who had come to be seen and to conquer upon the boards of a London theatre. Everybody was there, for the afternoon was late, and the throng was thickest just at this hour.

Gerard Hillersdon went about from group to group, everywhere received with cordiality and *empressement*, but lingering nowhere—not even when the tiny soubrette told him she was just dying for another ice, and she reckoned he'd take her to the tree over there to get one—always in quest of that one somebody who made it worth his while to run the gauntlet of everybody. One of his oldest friends seized upon him,

a man with whom he had been at Oxford seven years before, with whom he had maintained the friendship begun in those days, and who was not to be put off with the passing hand-shake which served for other people.

"I want a talk with you, Hillersdon. Why didn't you look me up last Tuesday? We were to have dined and done a theatre. Don't apologise; I see you forgot all about it. By Jove, old fellow, you are looking dreadfully washed out. What have you been doing with yourself?"

"Nothing beyond the usual mill-round. A succession of late parties may have impaired the freshness of my complexion."

"Come up the river with me. Let me see, to-morrow will be Saturday. We can go to Oxford by the afternoon express, spend a couple of nights at the Mitre, look up the dons whom we knew as undergrads, and row down to Windsor by Tuesday night."

"I should adore it; but it's impossible. I have an engagement which will keep me in London. I shall see you again presently."

He slipped out of the little group in which his

friend figured. He had made the circuit of the lawn, looking right and left for that tall and graceful form which his eye would have recognised even afar off; and now he plunged into the shrubberied labyrinth which lay between the fine, broad lawn and the high walls which secluded Lady Fridoline's domain from the vulgar world.

He passed a good many couples sauntering slowly in the leafy shade, and talking in those subdued accents which seem to mean very much, and generally mean very little. At last, in the distance, he saw the form and face he was seeking—a tall, dark woman, with proudly poised head and splendid eyes, who walked with leisurely step, and tossed her parasol to and fro with a movement eminently expressive of *ennui*.

She was walking with a young man who was supposed to be a fast ascending star in the heaven of literature—a young man who was something of a journalist, and something of a poet, who wrote short stories in the magazines, was believed to contribute to *Punch*, and was said to have written a three-volume novel. But

however brilliantly this young gentleman may have been talking, Edith Champion had evidently had enough of him, for at sight of Hillersdon her face lighted up, and she held out her hand in eager welcome.

They clasped hands, and he turned back and walked on her right in silence, while the journalist prattled on her left. Presently they met another trio of a mother and daughters, and the journalist was absorbed and swept along by this female brood, leaving Mrs. Champion and Hillersdon *téte-à-téte*.

"I thought you were not coming," she said.

"Did you doubt I should be here after you had told me I should see you? I want to see as much of you as possible to-day."

"Why to-day more than all other days?"

"Because it is my last day in town."

"What, you are leaving so soon? Before Goodwood?"

"I don't care two straws for Goodwood."

"Nor do I. But why bury one's self in the country or at some German bath too early in the year? Autumn is always long enough. One need not anticipate it. Is your doctor

sending you away? Are you going for your cure?"

"Yes, I am going for my cure."

"Where?"

"Immerschlafenbad," he answered, inventing a name on the instant.

"I never heard of the place. One of those new springs which doctors are always developing, no doubt. Every fashionable physician has his particular fad in the way of a watering-place. And you are really going to-morrow?"

"To-morrow I shall be gone."

"How shall I live without you?" she sighed, with the prettiest skin-deep sentiment, which wounded him almost more than her disdain could have done. "At least I must have all your society till you are gone. You must dine with me and share my opera-box. 'Don Giovanni' is an opera of which one can never have too much, and a new soprano is to be the Zerlina, a South American girl of whom great things are expected."

"Is Mr. Champion at home?"

"No, he is in Antwerp. There is something important going on there—something to do with

railways. You know how he rushes about. I shall have no one but my cousin, Mrs. Gresham, whom you know of old, the Suffolk vicar's lively wife. We shall be almost *tête-à-tête*. I shall expect you at eight o'clock."

"I will be punctual. What a threatening day," he said, looking up at the gathering darkness which gave a wintry air to the summer foliage. "There must be a storm coming."

"Evidently. I think I had better go home. Will you take me to my carriage?"

"Let me get you some tea before you go."

They strolled across the grass to the leafy tent. A good many people had gone, scared by the thunder-clouds. Lady Fridoline had deserted her post in the portico, tired of saying good-bye, and was taking a hasty cup of tea amidst a little knot of intimates. She was lamenting the non-arrival of some one.

"So shameful to disappoint me, after distinctly promising to be here," she said.

"Who is the defaulter, dear Lady Fridoline?" asked Mrs. Champion.

"Mr. Jermyn, the new thought-reader."

"Jermyn!" echoed a middle-aged man, who

was attending to Lady Fridoline's tea, "Jermyn, the mystery man. I should hardly call him by the old name of thought-reader. He marks a new departure in the region of the uncanny. He is not content with picking up pins, or finding unconsidered trifles. He unearths people's secrets, reads their hidden lives in a most uncomfortable way. I have seen a large party reduced to gloom by half an hour of Mr. Jermyn. I would as soon invite Mephistopheles to a garden-party. But people are so morbid, they will hazard anything for a new sensation."

"It is something to touch only the fringe of other worlds," replied Lady Fridoline, "and whatever Mr. Jermyn's power may be, it lies beyond the plummet line of *our* thought or touch. He told me of circumstances in my own life that it was impossible for him to have discovered except by absolute divination."

"Then you believe in his power of divination?" asked Mrs. Champion, with languid interest.

"I can't help believing."

"Yes, because you have not found out the trick of the thing. There is always a trick in

these things, which is inevitably found out sooner or later; and then people wonder that they can have been so foolish as to believe," said Mrs. Champion.

The curtain of leaves parted as she spoke, and a young man came through the opening—a young man whom Lady Fridoline welcomed eagerly.

"I was just telling my friends how disappointed I should be if you did not come," she said, and then, turning to Edith Champion, she introduced the new-comer as Mr. Jermyn.

"Lady Fridoline has been trying to make us feel creepy by her description of your occult powers, Mr. Jermyn," said Mrs. Champion, "but you do not look a very alarming personage."

"Lady Fridoline exaggerated my poor gifts in her infinite kindness," replied Jermyn, with a laugh that had a gnome-like sound to Mrs. Champion's ears.

Mr. Jermyn was a pleasant-looking young man, tall, slim, and fair, with a broad, strongly marked brow, which receded curiously above the temples, and with hair and moustache of that pale yellowish hue which seems most

appropriate to the faun and satyr races. Something in the way this short curling hair was cut about brow and ears, or in the shape of the ears themselves, suggested the satyr type; otherwise there was nothing in the young man's physiognomy, bearing, or dress which made him different from other well-bred and well-dressed men of his age. His laugh had a fresh and joyous ring, which made it agreeable to hear, and he laughed often, looking at the commonest things in a mirthful spirit.

Lady Fridoline insisted upon his taking some refreshment, and when he had disposed of a lemon-ice, she carried him off for a stroll round the lawn, eager to let people see her latest celebrity. There was a little buzz of talk, and an obvious excitement in the air as he passed group after group. He had shown himself rarely in society, and his few performances had been greatly discussed and written about. Letters exalting him as a creature gifted with superhuman powers had alternated with letters denouncing him as an impostor in one of the most popular daily papers. The people who are always ready to believe in the impossible

were loud in the assertion of his good faith, and would not hear of trickery or imposture.

There was an eager expectation of some manifestation of his powers this afternoon, as he walked across the lawn with Lady Fridoline, and people who had been on the point of departure lingered in the hope of being thrilled and frightened, as they had heard of other people being thrilled and frightened, by this amiable-looking youth with the fair complexion and yellow hair. The very incongruity of that fair and youthful aspect with the ghastly or the supernatural made Justin Jermyn so much the more interesting.

He walked about the grounds with his hostess for some time, all her duties of leave-taking suspended, and she to all appearance absorbed in earnest conversation with the Fate-Revealer, every one watchful and expectant. Hillersdon and Mrs. Champion were sitting side by side upon a rustic bench, the lady no longer in a hurry to depart.

"You don't believe in any nonsense of this kind, I know," she said, in her low, listless voice, without looking at her companion.

"I believe in nothing but disillusion, the falsehood inherent in all things."

"You are in an unhappy mood to-day, I think," she said, with a touch of interest.

"Atmospherical, perhaps," he answered, with a laugh. "You can hardly expect anybody to feel very happy under that leaden sky."

Lady Fridoline and her companion had separated. He was walking towards the house; she was going rapidly from group to group, talking and explaining with animated gestures.

"There is going to be a performance," said Mrs. Champion, rising. "If there is any excitement to be had let us have our share of it."

"You want the secrets of your life to be read?" asked Gerard.

"Yes, yes, yes. I want to see what modern magic can do."

"And you are not afraid? That is because yours is only a surface life—an existence that begins and ends in wealth and luxury, fine clothes and fine horses. What have you to fear from sorcery? There are no more secrets in your life than in a doll's life."

"You are very impertinent."

"I am going away, and I can afford to quarrel with you. Would to God I could stir some kind of feeling in you—yes, even make you angry before I go."

"I am afraid you are an egotist," she said, smiling at him with lovely, inscrutable eyes.

She went across the lawn to Lady Fridoline.

"Are we going to have any magic?" she asked.

"You must not utter that word before Mr. Jermyn, unless you want to offend him. He has a horror of any idea of that kind. He calls his wonderful gift only insight, the power to look through the face into the mind behind it, and from the mind to the life which the mind has shaped and guided. He claims no occult power —only a keener vision than the common run of mankind. He is going to sit in the library for the next half-hour, and if anybody wants to test his powers they can go in—one at a time—and talk to him."

Anybody seemed likely to be everybody in this case, for there was a general and hurried movement towards the house.

"Come," said Edith Champion peremptorily,

and she and Hillersdon followed the crowd, getting in advance of most people, with swift, vigorous steps.

The library at Fridoline House was a large room that occupied nearly the whole of one wing. It was approached by a corridor, and Mrs. Champion and her escort found this corridor choked with people, all eager to interview Mr. Jermyn.

The approach to the oracle was strongly defended, however, by two gentlemen, who had been told off for that purpose, one being a Colonel of Engineers and the other a Professor of Natural Science.

"We shall never get through this herd," said Gerard, looking with infinite contempt at the throng of smart people, all panting for a new sensation. "Let us try the other door."

He was an intimate at Fridoline House, and knew his way to the small ante-room at the back of the library. If the door of that room were unguarded he and his companion might surprise the wizard, and steal a march upon all that expectant frivolity in the corridor. The whole thing was beneath contempt, no doubt, and he,

Gerard Hillersdon, was not even faintly interested in it, but it interested Edith Champion, and he was anxious to gratify her whim.

He led her round by the hall and Lady Fridoline's boudoir, to the room behind the library, opened the door ever so gently, and listened to the voices within.

"It is wonderful, positively wonderful," said a voice in awe-stricken undertones.

"Are you satisfied, madam? Have I told you enough?" asked Jermyn.

"More than enough. You have made me utterly miserable."

Then came the flutter of a silken skirt, and the opening and closing of a door, and then Jermyn looked quickly towards that other door which Hillersdon was holding ajar.

"Who's there?" he asked.

"A lady who would like to talk with you before you are exhausted by that clamorous herd in the corridor. May she come to you at once?"

"It is Mrs. Champion," said Jermyn. "Yes, let her come in."

"He could not possibly have seen me,"

whispered Edith Champion, who had been standing behind the door.

"He divined your presence. He is no more a magician than I am in that matter," said Hillersdon, as she passed him, and closed the door behind her.

She came out after a five minutes' conference, much paler than when she entered.

"Well, has he told the lovely doll her latest secret, the mystery of a new gown from Felix or Raunitz?" asked Gerard.

"I will see you now, if you have anything to say to me, Mr. Hillersdon," said Jermyn airily.

"I am with you in a moment," answered Gerard, lingering on the threshold, and holding Mrs. Champion's hand in both of his. "Edith, what has he said to you; you look absolutely frightened."

"Yes, he has frightened me—frightened me by telling me my own thoughts. I did not know I was so full of sin. Let me go, Gerard. He has made me hate myself. He will do as much for you, perhaps. He will make you odious in your own eyes. Yes, go to him; hear all that he can tell you."

She broke from him, and hurried away, he looking after her anxiously. Then with a troubled sigh, he went to hear what this new adept of a doubtful science might have to say to him.

The library was always in shadow at this hour, and now, with that grey threatening sky outside the long narrow Queen Anne windows, the room was wrapped in a wintry darkness, against which the smiling countenance of the diviner stood out in luminous relief.

"Sit down, Mr. Hillersdon, I am not going to hurry because of that mob outside," said Jermyn gaily, throwing himself back in the capacious arm-chair, and turning his beaming face towards Hillersdon. "I am interested in the lady who has just left me, and I am still more interested in you?"

"I ought to feel honoured by that interest," said Hillersdon, "but I confess to a doubt of its reality. What can you know of a man whom you have seen for the first time within the last half-hour?"

"I am so sorry for you," said Jermyn, ignoring the direct question, "so sorry. A young man of

your natural gifts—clever, handsome, well-bred —to be so tired of life already, so utterly despondent of the future and its infinite chances, that you are going to throw up the sponge, and make an end of it all to-night. It is really too sad."

Hillersdon stared at him in blank amazement. Justin Jermyn made the statement as if it were the most natural thing in the world that he should have fathomed another man's intention.

"I cannot accept compassion from any one, least of all from a total stranger," said Hillersdon, after that moment of surprise. "Pray what is there in my history or my appearance that moves you to this wild conjecture?"

"No matter by what indications I read your mind," answered Jermyn lightly. "You know I have read you right. You are one of my easiest cases; everything about you is obvious—stares me full in the face. The lady who has just left us needed a subtler power of interpretation. She does not wear her heart upon her sleeve; and yet I think she will admit that I startled her. As for you, my dear fellow, I am particularly frank with you because I want to prevent your carrying

out that foolish notion of yours. The worst thing that a man can do with his life is to throw it away."

"I admit no man's right to offer me advice."

"You think that is out of my line. I am a fortune-teller, and nothing else. Well, I will tell you your fortune, Mr. Hillersdon, if you like. You will not carry out your present intention—yet awhile, or in the mode and manner you have planned. Good afternoon." He dismissed his visitor with a careless nod as he rose to open the door communicating with the corridor, whence came a buzz of eager voices, mixed with light laughter. People were prepared to be startled, yet could but regard the whole business in a somewhat jocular spirit. It was only the select few who gave Justin Jermyn credit for occult power.

CHAPTER II.

"OH, PITIFUL YOUNG MAN, STRUCK BLIND WITH BEAUTY."

EDITH CHAMPION was one of the handsomest women in London, a woman whose progress was followed at all great parties and public gatherings by the hum of an admiring multitude, whispering her praises, or telling the uninformed that the dark-eyed woman with the tall, Juno-like form was *the* Mrs. Champion. Four years ago she had been one of a trio of lovely sisters, the daughters of an impecunious Yorkshire squire, a man who had wasted a fine fortune on the turf, and was ending his days in debt and difficulty at a moated grange in the West Riding. The three lovely sisters were such obviously marketable property that aunts and uncles were quick to compassionate their forlorn condition, and they were duly launched in Lon-

don society. The two elder were young women of singular calmness and perspicuity, and got themselves well married, the first to a wealthy baronet, the second to a marquis, without giving trouble to anybody concerned in the transaction; but the youngest girl, Edith, showed herself wayward and wilful, and expressed an absurd desire to marry Gerard Hillersdon, the man she loved. This desire was frustrated, but not so promptly as it should have been, and the young lady contrived to make her attachment public property before uncles or aunts could crush the flowers of sentiment under the hoof of worldly wisdom. But the sentiment was crushed somehow, the world knew not with how many tears, or with what girlish pleading for mercy, and the season after this foolish entanglement Edith Champion accepted the addresses of an elderly stockbroker and reputed millionaire, who made a handsomer settlement than the middle-aged marquis had made upon her elder sister.

Mr. Champion was good-natured and unsuspicious, his mind being almost entirely absorbed in that exciting race for wealth which had been the business of his life from boyhood.

He wanted a beautiful wife as the solace of his declining years, and the one thing needed to complete the costly home which he had built for himself on a heathy ridge among those romantic hills where Surrey overlooks Sussex. The wife was the final piece of furniture to be chosen for this splendid mansion, and he had chosen that crowning ornament in a deliberate and leisurely manner. He was the last man to plague himself by any subtle questionings as to the sentiments of the lady so honoured, or to be harassed by doubts of her fidelity. He had no objection to seeing his wife surrounded by youthful admirers. Was she not meant to be admired, as much as his pictures and statues? He found no fault with the chosen band of "nice boys" who attended her afternoon at home, or crowded the back of her box when the curtain was down at opera-house or theatre; and if Gerard Hillersdon were more constant than all the others in his attendance, the fact never presented itself in any unpleasant light to Mr. Champion. Had he given himself the trouble to think about his wife's relations with her *cavaliere servente* he would most assuredly have told himself that she

was much too well placed to overstep the limits of prudence, and that no woman in her right senses would abandon a palace in Surrey and a model house in Hertford Street for the caravanseries that lodge the *divorcée*. He would have remembered also with satisfaction that his wife's settlement, liberal as it was, would be made null and void by a divorce.

And thus for three years of his life—perhaps the best and brightest years in a man's life, from twenty-five to twenty-eight—Gerard Hillersdon had given up all his thoughts, aspirations, and dreams to the most hopeless of all love affairs, an attachment to an irreproachable matron, a woman who had accepted her lot as an unloving wife and who meant to do her duty, in her own cold and measured way, to an unloved husband; yet who clung to the memory of a girlish love and fostered the passion of her lover, caring, or at least seeming to care, nothing for his peace, and never estimating the wrong she was doing him.

To this passion everything in the young man's life had been sacrificed. He had begun his career on fire with ambition, believing in his capacity to succeed in more than one profession;

and in the first flush of his manhood he had done some really good work in imaginative literature, had written a novel which took the town, and had made his brief success as an original writer, romantic, light of touch, unconventional; but he had been drifted into idleness by a woman who treated him as some queen or princess in the days of chivalry might have treated her page. She spoilt his career, just when a lasting success was within his reach, needing only earnestness and industry on his part. She had wasted the golden days of his youth, and had given him in exchange only smiles and sweet words, and a place at her dinner-table in a house where he had lost all prestige from being seen too often, the one inevitable guest whose presence counted for nothing. He had been in all things her slave, offending the people she disliked, and wasting his attention and his substance on her favourites, faithful to her caprice of the hour, were it never so foolish.

And now after three years of this fond slavery the end had come. He was ruined, and was worse than ruined. He had been living from hand to mouth, writing for magazines and news-

papers, earning a good deal of money in a casual way, but never enough to keep him out of debt; and now he saw bankruptcy staring him in the face, and with bankruptcy dishonour, for he had gambling debts which, as the son of a country parson, he ought never to have incurred, and which it would be disgrace not to pay.

Had this dread of disgrace been his only trouble, he might have treated it as other men have treated such dark episodes. He might have told himself that England is not the world, and that there is always room for youth and daring under the tropic stars, and that the name with which a man has been labelled at starting in life is not so interwoven with his being that he need mind changing it for another, and giving himself a fresh start. He might have reasoned thus had he still felt the delight in life which makes the adventurer live down shame and set his face to untrodden worlds across the sea. But he had no such delight. The zest of life had gone out of him. Love itself had lost all fervour. He hardly knew whether he cared any more for the woman to whom he had sacrificed his youth, whether the flame of love had not expired altogether

amidst the vacuity of two conventional existences. The only thing which he knew for certain was that he loved no other woman, and that he took no interest in life adequate to the struggle it would cost him to live through the crisis that was coming.

And thus, with all serious consideration, he had decided upon a sudden exit from a scene which no longer interested him. Yet with a curious inconsistency he wanted to spend his last hours in Edith Champion's society, and never had he seemed gayer or happier than he seemed that evening at the triangular dinner in Hertford Street.

They were dining in a little octagon room at the back of the house, a room upholstered like a tent, and furnished in so Oriental a fashion that it seemed a solecism to be sitting upon chairs, and not to be eating pillau or kibobs with one's fingers. The clerical cousin was a very agreeable personage—plump and rosy, strongly addicted to good living, and looking upon the beautiful Mrs. Champion as a being whose normal state was to be adored by well-bred young men, and to dispense hospitality to poor relations.

Not a word was said about Justin Jermyn throughout the dinner, but while Gerard was helping Mrs. Champion to put on her cloak, she asked suddenly—

"How did you get on with the Fate-reader?"

"Very badly. He struck me as an insolent *farceur*. I wonder society can encourage such a person."

"Yes, he is decidedly insolent. I was rather scared by the things he said to me, but a few minutes' thought showed me that his talk was mere guess work. I shall never ask him to any party of mine."

"You must have rushed away in a great hurry. I was only five minutes closeted with the oracle, but when I went to the hall you and your carriage had vanished."

"I had an irresistible desire to get out of the house. I felt as if I were escaping from Tophet; and then I had to call for Mrs. Gresham"—the cousin—"at the Knightsbridge Riding School, where the poor thing had been slaving at Lady Penniddock's refreshment stall."

"It was abject slavery," protested Mrs. Gresham. "I'm afraid I shall detest tea and

coffee all the days of my life, and I was so fond of them"—with profound regret. "The very look of a bath bun will make me ill."

"*Dépêchons*," said Mrs. Champion. "We shall hear very little of the new Zerlina if we go on dawdling here."

And so in a feverish hurry she led the way to her carriage, where there was just room enough for Gerard on the front seat.

CHAPTER III.

"THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY."

THE opera house was not brilliantly filled. There were a great many important functions going on that evening, events thickening as the season sloped towards its close, and it may be that the new Zerlina had not been sufficiently puffed, or that those enthusiasts who can never have too much Mozart are only the minority among opera-goers. There were a good many blank spaces in the stalls, and a good many untenanted boxes, nor was the display of diamonds and beauty as dazzling as it might have been.

In an audience at half power Mrs. Champion's commanding loveliness and Mrs. Champion's tiara of diamond stars shone conspicuous. She was dressed with that careless air which was her speciality, in some filmy fabric of daffodil colour,

which was arranged in loose folds across her bust and shoulders, caught here and there, as if at random, with a diamond star. A great cluster of yellow orchids was fastened on one shoulder, and there were yellow orchids pinned on her black lace fan, while long black gloves gave a touch of eccentricity to her toilette. Her one object in dressing herself was to be different from other women. She never wore the fashionable colour or the fashionable fabric, but gloried in opposition, and took infinite pains to find something in Paris or Vienna which nobody was wearing in London.

The awe-inspiring music which closes the second act, and seems to presage the horror of the scenes that are coming, was hurrying to its brilliant finish, when Gerard, looking idly down upon the stalls, started at sight of the man who had mystified him more than any other human being had ever done. There, lounging in his place between two unoccupied seats, he saw Justin Jermyn, apparently enjoying the music with that keen delight which only the real music-lover can feel. His head was thrown back, his thin pale lips were slightly parted,

and his large blue eyes beamed with rapture. Yes, a man who passionately loved music, or else a consummate actor.

The very presence of the man recalled Gerard Hillersdon to the business which was to be done after the green curtain had fallen, and his fair companions had been handed into their carriage. Ten minutes in a hansom, and he would be in his lodgings, and there would be no excuse for delay. His time would have come before the clock of St. James's Church struck midnight. He had looked at his pistol-case involuntarily while he was dressing for the evening. He knew where it stood ready to his hand; and close beside the pistol-case was a business-like letter from his landlord requesting the settlement of a long account for rent and maintenance—only such breakfasts and casual meals as a young man of fashion takes at his lodgings—which had mounted to formidable figures. And an ounce of lead was to be the sole settlement. For the first time in his life Mr. Hillersdon felt sorry for those eminently respectable people, his landlord and landlady. He began to consider whether he ought not at least to shoot himself out of doors,

rather than to inflict upon an old-established lodging-house the stigma of a suicide; but the inconvenience of self-destruction *sub jove* was too apparent to him, and he felt that he must be selfish in this final act of a selfish life.

Yes, there sat Justin Jermyn, complacent, full of enjoyment; the man who had told him what he was going to do. How the modern sorcerer would pride himself upon that fore-knowledge to-morrow when the evening papers told of the deed that had been done. There would doubtless be a paragraph in the papers—three lines at most—and perhaps a line on the contents bill. DISTRESSING SUICIDE OF A GENTLEMAN. Suicides are always described as distressing when the self-slaughterer is of gentle blood.

He felt angry with Jermyn for having contrived to haunt these closing hours of his life. He sat watching the sorcerer all through the last act of the opera, noting his elfin enjoyment of all that was diabolical in the music and the libretto. How he grinned at the discomfiture of Don Giovanni, how he rocked himself with laughter at the abject terror of Leperello. No one approached him as an acquaintance. He

sat in complete isolation, but in supreme enjoyment, apparently the happiest man in that great theatre, the youngest and the freshest in the capacity to enjoy.

"And that laughing fool read my purpose as if my brain had been an open book," mused Hillersdon savagely.

His anger was not lessened when he glanced round while he was conducting Mrs. Champion to her carriage, and saw the Fate-reader's slim, supple figure behind him, and the Fate-reader's gnome-like countenance smiling at him under an opera hat.

"I am so sorry you are leaving London so soon," said Edith Champion, as he lingered at the carriage-door for the one half-minute allowed by the Jack in office at his elbow.

She gave him her hand, and even pressed the hand which held hers, with more sentiment than she was wont to show.

"Drive on, coachman," shouted the Commissionaire. "Now then, next carriage."

No time for sentimental partings there!

Hillersdon walked away from the theatre, meaning to pick up the first hansom that offered

itself. He had not gone three steps along the Bow Street pavement when Jermyn was close beside him.

"Are you going home, Mr. Hillersdon?" he asked, in a friendly tone. "Delightful opera, 'Don Giovanni,' ain't it? The best out and away. 'Faust' is my next favourite; but even Gounod can't touch Mozart."

"I dare say not; but I am no connoisseur. Good night, Mr. Jermyn. I am going home immediately."

"Don't. Come and have some supper with me. I only half told your fortune this afternoon, you were so infernally impatient. I have a good deal more to tell you. Come and have some supper in my chambers."

"Some other night, perhaps, Mr. Jermyn. I am going straight home."

"And you mean there shall be no other nights in your life?" said Jermyn, in a low, silky voice that made Hillersdon savage, for it jarred upon his irritated nerves more than the harshest accents could have done.

"Good night," he said curtly, turning on his heel.

Jermyn was not to be repulsed.

"Come home with me," he said; "I won't leave you while you have the suicide's line on your forehead. Come to supper with me, Hillersdon. I have a brand of champagne that will smooth out that ugly wrinkle, if you'll only give the stuff a fair trial."

"I don't know where you live, and I don't care a jot for your wines or anybody else's. I am leaving town to-morrow morning, and I want my last hours in London for my own purposes."

Jermyn put his arm through Hillersdon's, wheeled him round in the direction of Long-acre, and quietly led him away. That was his answer to Hillersdon's testy speech, and the young man submitted, feeling a *vis inertiæ*, a languid indifference which made him consentient to a stranger's will, having lost all will-power of his own.

He was angry with Jermyn, yet even more angry with himself, and in that perturbation of mind, tempered curiously with supineness, he took but little note of which way they went. He remembered going by Lincoln's Inn Fields and the Turnstile. He remembered crossing Holborn,

but knew not afterwards whether the shabby, squalid looking Inn, beneath whose gloomy gate-house Jermyn led him, did, or did not, open directly out of the great thoroughfare.

He remembered always that it was a most dismal assemblage of tall, shabby houses, forming a quadrangle, in whose stony centre there was a dilapidated basin, which might once have been a fountain. The summer moon, riding high and fast among wind-tossed clouds, shone full into the stony yard, and lit up the shabby fronts of the houses, but not one lamp-lit window cheered with the suggestion of life and occupation.

"Do you mean to say you live in this ghastly hole?" he exclaimed, speaking for the first time since they left Bow Street; "it looks as if it were tenanted by a company of ghosts."

"A good many of the houses are empty, and I dare say the ghosts of dead usurers and dishonest lawyers and broken-hearted clients do have a high time in the old rooms now and again," answered Jermyn, with his irrepressible laugh; "but I have never seen any company but rats, mice, and such small deer, as Bacon says. Of

course, he *was* Bacon. We're all agreed upon that."

Hillersdon ignored this frivolity, and stood dumbly, while Jermyn put his key into a door, opened it, and led the way into a passage that was pitch dark. Not a pleasant situation to be alone in a dark passage at midnight in a sparely inhabited block of buildings quite cut off from the rest of the world, in company with a man whose repute was decidedly diabolical.

Jermyn struck a match and lighted a small hand-lamp, which improved the situation just a little.

"My den is on the second floor," he said, "and I've made the place pretty comfortable inside, though it looks rather uncanny outside."

He led the way up an old oak staircase, narrow, shabby, and unadorned, but oak-panelled, and therefore precious in the eyes of those who cling fondly to the past and to that old London which is so swiftly vanishing off the face of the earth.

The little lamp gave but just light enough to make the darkness of the staircase visible, till they came to a landing where the moon looked in through the murky panes of a tall window, and

anon to a higher landing, where a vivid streak of lamplight under a door gave the first token of habitation. Jermyn opened this door, and his guest stood half-blinded by the brilliant light, and not a little astonished by the elegant luxury of these two rooms, opening into each other with a wide archway, which Mr. Jermyn had denominated his "den."

Hillersdon had been in many bachelor-rooms within the precincts of The Albany, in Piccadilly, St. James's, and Mayfair, but he had seen nothing more studiously luxurious than the Fate-reader's den. Heavy velvet curtains, of darkish green, draped the shuttered windows. The ingle-nook was quaint, artistic, comfortable; the glistening tiles were decorated with storks and sea-birds, which might have been painted by Stacey Marks himself. The furniture was all that is most rare and genuine in the relics of the Chippendale era. The carpet was a marvel of Oriental undertones, and Oriental richness of fabric. The few pieces of pottery which made spots of vivid colour here and there amidst the prevailing sombreness of hue, were choicest specimens of Indian and Italian ware. The pictures were few. A Judas, by

Titian; a wood nymph, naked and unashamed, against a background of dark foliage, by Guido; and three curious bits of the early German school, made up the show of art, save for a bust of the Fate-reader in black marble, a curiously faithful likeness, in which the faun-like character of the head, and the elfin smile, were but slightly accentuated. This bust stood upon a pedestal of dark red porphyry, and seemed to command the room.

The inner room was furnished as a library. There the lamps were shaded and the light subdued. Here, under the centre lamp that hung low over the small round table appeared all the arrangements for a dainty little supper. Two covered dishes on a chafing dish; a truffled pullet and a miniature York ham, a lobster salad, strawberries, peaches, champagne in a brazen ice-pail, ornamented with Bacchanalian figures in repoussé work.

"My servant has gone to bed," said Jermyn, "but he has left everything ready, and we can wait upon each other. Cutlets, salmi aux olives," he said, lifting the covers; "which will you start with?"

"Neither, thanks. I told you I had no appetite."

"Discouraging to a man who is as hungry as a hunter," retorted Jermyn, helping himself. "Try that Madeira, it may give you an appetite."

Hillersdon seated himself opposite his host and took a glass of wine. His curiosity was stimulated by the Fate-reader's surroundings; and, after all, the thing which he had to do might remain undone for a few hours. He could not help being interested in this young man, who, either by instinct or by a subtle guess, had fathomed his purpose. The luxury of these rooms piqued him, so striking a contrast with the shabbiness of his own West End lodging, albeit that lodging was far from cheap. He was supposed to pay for "situation." Of luxury he had nothing, of comfort very little. How did Jermyn contrive to be so well off, he wondered? Did he live by fate-reading, or had he means of his own?

Jermyn was eating his supper all this time with a fine appetite and an epicurean gusto. After a couple of glasses of Madeira, his guest helped himself to lobster salad, and when Jermyn opened the champagne the two men were hob-

nobbing comfortably, and, that wine being choice of its kind and admirably iced, Hillersdon drank the best part of a bottle, and found himself enjoying his supper more than he had enjoyed anything in the way of meat and drink for a long time.

The conversation during supper was of the lightest, Jermyn letting off his criticisms, mostly unfavourable, upon people known to them both, and laughing tremendously at his own wit. He was careful not to mention Mrs. Champion, however, and Hillersdon had no objection to spatter mud upon the ruck of his acquaintance. Supper over, and a box of cigars open between them, with a silver spirit-lamp, shaped like a serpent offering its flaming jaws for their use, the men grew more serious. It was past one o'clock. They had been a long time over their supper, and they seemed no longer strangers—intimates, rather, not united by any particular esteem for each other, but one in their contempt for other people.

"The champagne has wiped out that ugly wrinkle already," said Jermyn, with his friendly air; "and now tell me what could induce you to contemplate such a thing."

"What thing?" asked Hillersdon, waxing moody.

Jermyn's reply was pantomimic. He passed his hand across his throat, significant of a razor; he turned his hand towards his open mouth, suggestive of a pistol; he tossed off an imaginary poison draught.

"You insist upon suggesting——" began Hillersdon, angrily.

"I tell you I saw it in your face. The man who contemplates suicide has a look which no man who reads the human countenance can mistake. There is a fixed horror in the eyes, as of one who stares into the unknown, and knows that he is nearing the mystery of life and death. There are perplexed lines about the brow, 'shall I, or shall I not?' and there is a nervous hurry, as of one who wants to get a disagreeable business over as soon as may be. I have never been mistaken yet in *that* look. Why, my dear fellow, why? Surely, life at eight and twenty is too precious a thing to be frittered away for a trifle."

"'You take my life when you do take the means by which I live,'" quoted Hillersdon.

"Bacon again! That fellow has something to

say about everything. You imply that you are impecunious, and would rather be dead than penniless."

"Take it so, if you please."

"Good. Now how can you tell that fortune is not waiting for you at some turn in the road you know not; that road of the future which no man knows till he treads it? So long as a man is alive he has always a chance of becoming a millionaire. So long as a woman is unmarried there is always the possibility of her marrying a duke."

"The chance of fortune in my case is so remote that it is not worth considering. I am the son of a country parson. I have no relative living likely to leave me the smallest legacy. Unless I could make a fortune by literature, I have no chance of making one by any exertion of my own, and my second book was so dire a failure that I have it not in me to write a third."

"Fortunes drop from the clouds sometimes. Have you never done any rich man a service which might prompt him—when distributing superfluous thousands—to leave a few to you?"

"Never, within my recollection."

"Come, now, looking back at your life, is there

no act in it of which you might fairly be proud, no touch of the heroic, no deed worthy a paragraph in the papers?"

"None. I once saved an old man's life; but I doubt if the life were worth saving, since the old wretch did not trouble himself to thank me for having risked my own life in his service."

"You saved an old man's life, at hazard of your own! Come, that sounds heroic," cried Jermyn, flinging his fair head back against the blackish green of the velvet chair cover, and laughing with all his might. The black bust showed a little to the left, above the level of his head, and it seemed to Hillersdon that the black face was laughing as broadly as the white one.

"Tell me the whole story—pray now—it sounds absolutely heroic," urged Jermyn.

"There is very little to tell," replied Hillersdon, coolly. "Nothing either to laugh at or to be thrilled by. I did only what any other active young man would have done in my position, seeing a feeble old man in peril of immediate death. It was at Nice. You know what a wilderness of iron the railway station there is, and how one has to hunt about for one's train. It was at carnival

time, dusk, and a great many people were going back to Cannes, I myself among them. The old man had arrived from another train going eastwards, and was making for the platform, when a great high engine bore steadily down upon him, by no means at express speed, but fast enough to paralyse him, so that, instead of getting out of the way, he stood staring, hesitating, helpless. An instant more, and that vast mass of iron would have cut him down and dashed the life out of him. I had but time to drag him out of the track before the engine passed me, brushing my shoulder as it went by. I took him to the platform. Hardly any one had seen our adventure. I had a friend with me at the station, with whom I had lunched at the Cosmopolitan, and who had insisted on seeing me off. I told him briefly what had happened, left the old man in his care, and rushed back to look for my own train, which I caught by the skin of my teeth."

"And the old churl never thanked you?"

"Not by one civil word. His only remark was an inquiry about his umbrella, which had fallen out of his hand when I plucked him from the jaws of death. I believe he felt himself aggrieved be-

cause I had not rescued his umbrella as well as himself."

"Was he English, do you think?"

"Distinctly British. A Frenchman or Italian would at least have been loquacious, if not grateful."

"The shock may have made him speechless."

"He found speech to inquire after his umbrella."

"True, that looked black!" said Jermyn, laughing; "I'm afraid he must have been a thankless old dog. And you took no trouble to find out who he was, I suppose — what manner of man you had snatched from sudden death?"

"I had not the slightest interest in his identity."

"So! Well, now, let us talk still further of yourself and your prospects. You know that people call me the Fate-reader. Now I have a fancy that your fortunes are on the threshold of a great change—and that, apart from the folly of anticipating Death, the inevitable enemy, in your case it may be very much worth while to live."

"You are vague and general. What form of good fortune do you predict for me?"

"I pretend to no gift of prophecy. I only profess the power of insight. I can read what men are—not what is going to happen to them; but as in many cases character is fate, I have been able to hazard some shrewd guesses about the future."

"And in my case, what are your guesses?"

"I would rather not tell you."

"The outlook is not satisfactory, then?"

"Not altogether. The character of a man who at eight and twenty can contemplate suicide as the shortest way out of his embarrassments is not a character that promises well. I am frank, you see."

"Vastly frank."

"Don't be angry," laughed Jermyn. "I pretend to be no hero myself, and if I were very hard up, or very much bored, I dare say I too might think of a bullet or a dose of prussic acid. Only that kind of idea argues a character at once weak and selfish. The man who takes his own life runs away from the universal battle, and shows a selfish indifference to those he leaves

behind, in whose minds the memory of his death will be a lasting pain."

"My poor mother," sighed Hillersdon, recognising the truth of this assertion.

"You would have killed yourself because you were ennuied and unhappy; because you have wasted opportunities, and given the best years of your life to a hopeless passion. Your reasons were not strong enough; and even if I were not here to demonstrate your folly, I think your hand must have faltered at the last moment, and you would have asked yourself—Is the outlook so very black after all? Does not one gleam of light pierce the darkness?"

"The outlook is as black as pitch," answered Hillersdon, expanding under the influence of the wine he had been drinking so freely, ready now to talk to this acquaintance of a day as if he were his bosom friend and companion of years; "there is not a gleam of light, not one! I have wasted my chances; I have frittered away whatever talent or capacity I may have possessed when I left the University. I am a dependent upon a father who can ill afford to support a son in idleness, and to whom I ought to be a help

rather than a burden. I have been—and must be as long as I live—the slave of a woman who exacts servitude and gives nothing—whose heart and mind after years of closest association are still mysteries to me; who will not own that she loves me, yet will not let me go."

"Mrs. Champion is a remarkably clever woman," said Jermyn, coolly; "but there are depths which you have never fathomed under that calm and virtuous surface. Leave her for another divinity, and you will see of what she is capable. If that hopeless attachment is your only trouble, I snap my fingers at the necessity of suicide. A day, an hour may bring you face to face with a woman whose influence will make you forget Edith Champion."

"You have no right to make free with Mrs. Champion's name. How do you know that she has any influence over my life?"

"I know what all the world knows—your world of Mayfair and Belgravia, Hyde Park and South Kensington—and I know what I read in the lady's face. A dangerous woman for you, Mr. Hillersdon; witness these wasted years of which you complain. But there are women as

fair, to love whom would be a less abject servitude. Do you remember the vision that Mephistopheles showed Faust in the witch's kitchen?"

"Gretchen at her spinning-wheel!"

"Gretchen at her wheel belongs to the opera, I fancy. The vision Faust saw in the witch's looking-glass was the vision of abstract beauty. You may remember that when he sees Gretchen in the street there is no recognition of that supernal face he had just seen in the glass. He was only caught by a pretty girl tripping modestly home from church. The vision may have been Aphrodite or Helen, for aught we know. A clever trick, no doubt, that vision in the glass. Look yonder, Hillersdon, look at that face there, known to you in the past—the face of a girl steeped in poverty, beautiful as a dream, yet no better off in this world for her loveliness. Look at that fragile form bending over a sewing-machine, our modern substitute for the spinning-wheel. Look at me, Hillersdon," repeated Jermyn, fixing him with those cold, calm, blue eyes, from which there radiated a sudden influence that steeped Gerard Hillersdon's senses

in a dreamy light, as of another world and atmosphere; "and now look yonder."

He waved his hand carelessly towards the inner room, where in the subdued light Hillersdon saw the figure of a girl, shadowy, dim, and vague at first, and then developing gradually from pale grey shadow into luminous distinctness. The face was turned to him, but the eyes saw him not; they gazed sadly out into space, full of hopeless melancholy, while the hands moved monotonously backwards and forwards across the table of a sewing-machine. A girl in a grey cotton frock, sitting at work at a sewing-machine. That was the vision Gerard Hillersdon saw against the dark background of Mr. Jermyn's library; but the girl's pinched and pallid face was as beautiful in form as the face of Raffaelle's loveliest Madonna, and in its profound melancholy there was a sweetness that melted his heart. Something, too, in that fair Gretchen-like countenance struck him as strangely familiar. He had seen the face before, not in a picture or in a statue, but in commonplace everyday life. When or where he knew not.

Jermyn threw his half-smoked cigar up into

the air, and burst into his elfin laugh. The vision faded on the instant, as if he had laughed it away.

"There is your modern Gretchen," he said, "a poor little sempstress, slaving from dawn to dark for daily bread, as beautiful as a Greek goddess, and virtuous enough to prefer poverty to degradation. There is your true type of a nineteenth-century Gretchen. How would you like to be Faust?"

"I should like to possess Faust's power; not to betray Gretchen, but to secure my own happiness."

"And what is your idea of happiness?" asked Jermyn, lighting a fresh cigar.

"Wealth," answered Hillersdon quickly. "For a man who has lived under the goad of poverty, who has felt day by day, and hour by hour, the torment of being poorer than his fellow-men, there can be but one idea of bliss. Money, and plenty of it. From my school days upwards I have lived among men better off than myself. At the University I got into trouble because I exceeded my allowance. My father could just afford to give me two hundred a year, I spent

from three to four hundred; but the excess, though it caused no end of trouble at home, left me still a pauper among men who spent a thousand. I had been sent to an expensive college, and told to economise; to enjoy all the privileges of contact with men of rank and position, to be among them but not of them. I happened to be popular, and so could not altogether seclude myself from my fellow-men. I was pinched and harassed at every turn, and yet plunged in debt, and a malefactor to my family. I came to London, studied for the Bar, ate my dinners, wasted my father's substance on fees, and never got a brief. I wrote a book which won instantaneous success, and for the moment I was rich. I thought I had opened a gold mine, bought my mother a pair of diamond earrings which she did not want, and sent my father a fine set of Jeremy Taylor, which he had been longing for ever since I could remember. I fell in love with a beautiful girl, who reciprocated my affection, but was not allowed to marry a man whose only resources were in his inkstand. She was not inconsolable, and our engagement was no sooner broken than she married a man old enough to be her grand-

father, and rich enough to make her a personage in the smart world. My next book, written while I was writhing under the sting of this disappointment, was a dead failure. I had no heart to begin another book. I have lived since, as a good many young men contrive to live in this great city, from hand to mouth, and the emptiness and hopelessness of my life have been known to me for a long time. Do you wonder that I began to think actual nothingness better than this middle state between life and death—this perpetual weariness of an inane and purposeless existence!"

"And you think that wealth would open up a new future, and that life would be no longer aimless?"

"Wealth means power," answered Hillersdon. "With wealth and youth no man should be unhappy, unless racked by physical pain. A rich man is master of the universe."

"Yes, but while he enjoys the power wealth gives, his life is ebbing. Every day of enjoyment, every ardent hope satisfied, every extravagant wish realised, is a nail in his coffin. The men who live longest are men of moderate

means—not worried by poverty nor elated by wealth—men in whose obscure and retired lives society takes very little interest—scholars, thinkers, inventors, some of them perhaps, whom the world hears of only after they are dead—men who think, and dream, and reason, but experience nothing of life's feverish movement or man's fiercer passions. Do you remember Balzac's story of the Peau de Chagrin?"

"Not very clearly. It was one of the first French novels I read; a kind of fairy tale, I think."

"It is more an allegory than a fairy tale. A young man, tired of life, like you, is on the brink of suicide—has made up his mind to die, as you made up your mind to-day—when, to beguile the time betwixt afternoon and night, he goes into a bric-à-brac shop and turns over the wonders of worlds old and new. Here, amidst treasures of art and relics of extinct civilizations, he finds the queerest curio of all in the person of the bric-à-brac dealer, a man who boasts of his century and more of life, the quiet passionless life of the thinker. This man shows him the Peau de Chagrin, the skin of a wild ass, hanging against

the wall. With that talisman he offers to make the intending suicide richer, more powerful, and more renowned than the king of the French. 'Read,' he cries, and the young man reads a Sanscrit inscription whose letters are so interwoven in the metallic lustre of the skin that no knife can eradicate the faintest line. The Sanscrit translated runs thus :—

If you possess me you possess all,
But your life will be mine. Wish,
And your wishes will be fulfilled,
But rule your wishes by
Your life. At every wish
I shall dwindle like
Your days. Would'st
Have me,
Take.

"This inscription is the allegory of life. The old man told the youth how he had offered the talisman to many, but how, though one and all laughed at its possible influence over their future destinies, all had refused to traffic with that unknown power. And for the owner of the talisman, why had he never tested its value? The old man answered that question by expounding his theory of life."

"And what was his theory?"

"'The mystery of human life lies in a nutshell,' said the centenarian. 'The life of action and the life of passion drain the sources of existence. To will, to do, to desire ardently, is to die. With every quickening of the pulse above normal health, with every tumult of the heart, with every fever of the brain, fired by ardent hopes and conflicting wishes, a shred is torn off the fabric of a man's life. The men who live to age like mine are the men whose passions and desires, ambitions and greed of power have been rigidly suppressed, the men of calm and contemplative temperament, in whom mind rises superior to heart and senses, who are content to reason, to know, to see, and understand the world in which they live.' And that old man was right. There is a hidden meaning in that sentence of Holy Writ—The race is not to the swift. If you would live long take life largo, not presto."

"Who cares for length of years?" exclaimed Hillersdon. "What a man wants is to *live*, not to crawl for a century on the face of this planet, afraid to lift his head from the earth lest a thunderbolt should strike him. I wish I could stroll into a bric-à-brac shop and find the peau

de chagrin. I would be content to see the talisman dwindle daily, if every diminution marked an hour of happiness, a wish realised."

"Well, I suppose that is the only philosophy of life congenial to a young mind," said Jermyn lightly. "The centenarian who never really lived boasts of length of days, and cheats himself with the idea that he has had the best of the bargain; but to live for ten joyous, reckless years must be better than to vegetate for a century."

"Infinitely better," said Hillersdon, rising in a fever of excitement, and beginning to walk about the room, looking at this and that, the bronze idols, the enamelled vases and old ivory carvings in the niches and recesses of a Bombay blackwood cabinet.

"You have the peau de chagrin hidden somewhere in your rooms, perhaps," he suggested, laughingly, "or, at any rate, some talisman which enables you to make light of life—to see a jest where other men see a problem only to be solved by death."

"No, I have no talisman. I have nothing but will—will strong enough to conquer passion—and insight by which I can read the mystery of

mankind. You who have a stronger individuality —a passionate, exacting personality, an intolerable ego which must be satisfied somehow—are created to suffer. I am created to enjoy. For me life, as you say, is a jest."

"So it was for Goethe's Devil," answered Hillersdon. "I believe there is a touch of the diabolical in your composition, and that you have about as much heart and conscience as Mephistopheles. However, I am beholden to you for your persistence in bringing me here to-night, for you have amused me, mystified me, stimulated my curiosity, and routed thoughts which I confess were of the darkest."

"Didn't I tell you a supper and a bottle of wine would be your best counsellor," exclaimed Jermyn, laughing.

"But the dark thoughts will return in a day or two, no doubt, since you have no talisman to offer me which will pour gold into empty pockets, and you do not even propose to buy my shadow. I would run the risk of being as conspicuous as Peter Schlemihl, for the same power to create illimitable heaps of sterling coin."

"Ah, those are old stories—allegories all, be

assured. If I were to say I saw the promise of fortune on that perplexed brow of yours you would laugh at me. All I ask is that if Fortune does pour her gifts into your lap you will remember that I bade you tarry at the gate of death."

CHAPTER IV.

"WE ARE SUCH STUFF AS DREAMS ARE MADE OF."

THE domes and steeples of the great city, towers and warehouses, roofs old and new, showed dark against a saffron sky, as Gerard Hillersdon set his face to the west in the freshness and quiet of early morning. He had drunk enough and talked enough to exalt his spirits with an unwonted elation, as if life and the world were new, and all his troubles and perplexities cast off like a slough, and flung behind him into the universal dust-heap men call the Past. There is no Nepenthe like a night's debauch for obliterating worldly cares. Unhappily the effect is but transient, and Memory will resume her sway. In this summer dawning Gerard walked through the empty streets with a tread as light as if his youth had never been shadowed by a care. In this mood of his he accepted Justin Jermyn as a

serious fact, a man of unusual gifts and faculties; a man who by fair means or foul had plucked him by the sleeve and held him back from the brink of a dark gulf which he shuddered to think upon.

"To be or not to be?" he muttered, slackening his steps in the morning solitude of Lincoln's Inn, where there were faint odours of foliage and flowers freshened by the dews of night. "To be or not to be? I was a fool to think that my choice was inevitable. Faust had the poison at his lips, when the Easter joybells stayed his hand. And after that burst of heavenly gladness—and after that thrilling chorus, 'Christ is risen'—came the fiend with his worldly-wise philosophy, and his gifts of wealth and power. Is the influence that stayed my hand from heaven or from hell, I wonder?"

His thoughts reverted to the face of the girl at the sewing-machine. He was in no mood to trouble himself as to the nature of the vision he had seen; whether it were hypnotic, or some juggler's trick produced by mechanical means. It was of the face that he thought, for it was a familiar face; a face out of the long ago; and he

tried in vain to fix it in his memory. It floated there, vaguely mixed with the vision of his vanished boyhood—a dream of summer and sunny days, of woods and waters, in the far-off west, which seemed as another and half-forgotten world in the midst of this grey, smoke-stained city.

He let himself into the dark and airless lodging-house passage, with his latchkey, a privilege he could scarcely hope to enjoy many days longer unless he could comply with, or compromise, the demand in his landlord's letter. Yet even the possibility of being turned out of doors seemed hardly to trouble him this morning. At the worst he could go down to his father's rectory, and bury himself among green leaves and village faces. And if he must be bankrupt, see his name in the *Gazette*, shameful as the thing would seem to the rural rector and his wife, he would not be the first. Among the youthful scions of the nobility bankruptcy is as common as scarlet-fever; nay, almost as inevitable as measles.

His sitting-room and the adjoining bedroom looked shabbier than usual in the clear morning light, after those luxurious rooms of Justin

Jermyn's. The furniture had been good enough once upon a time, for its specific purpose—brass bedstead, bird's-eye-maple wardrobe and dressing-table in the bedroom, walnut-wood and cretonne in the sitting-room—but everything in the rooms had grown shabby and squalid with the wear and tear of successive lodgers; and the landlord, crippled by bad debts, had never been rich enough to renew the cretonne, or improve upon the Philistinism of the walnut-wood. A sordid den, repulsive to the eye of a man with any feeling for the beautiful.

Hillersdon was tired and exhausted, but slumber was far from his eyelids, and he knew it was useless to go to bed while his brain was working with a forty-horse power, and his temples were racked with neuralgic pain. He flung himself into an arm-chair, lighted a cigar which Jermyn had thrust upon him at parting, and looked idly round the room.

There were some letters upon the table, at least half a dozen, the usual thing no doubt; bills and threatening letters from lawyers of obscure address, calling his attention to neglected applications from tradesmen. Common as such letters

were, it was always a shock to him to find that the bland and obliging purveyor had handed him over to the iron hand of the solicitor. He was in no haste to open those letters, which would supply so many items in his schedule, perhaps, a few days later. Insolvency had been staring him in the face for a long time, and there was no alternative between death and the *Gazette*.

He finished his cigar, and then began to open his letters, deliberately, and as it were with a gloomy relish.

The first was from his hatter, piteously respectful; the second was from a solicitor in Bloomsbury, calling attention to an account of three years' standing with a Bond Street hairdresser; and the third and fourth were those uninforming yet significant documents, bill delivered, bearing date of the vanished years, and with a footnote requesting his earliest attention. Bill delivered. What value had he received for the sums demanded. A scarf, a pair of gloves, now and again, bought casually *pour passer le temps*, a set of shirts, perhaps, ordered to please the tradesman rather than from any need of his own, a

dressing-jacket or two, and behold the man was clamouring for thirty-seven pounds odd shillings and pence.

He opened the fifth letter, which announced itself upon the envelope as from Lincoln's Inn Fields, and which, by the thickness of the paper and style of the address, was at least from a solicitor of position and respectability. Yet doubtless the tune was only the old tune, played upon a superior instrument. No, by Heaven, it was not the old formula.

"190, Lincoln's Inn Fields, W.C.

"*July* 17, 188—.

"SIR,

"If you are the same Mr. Gerard Hillersdon who in 1879 rescued an old gentleman from an approaching engine in the station at Nice, we have the honour to inform you that our late client, Mr. Milford, banker, of London, Marseilles, and Nice, has bequeathed the bulk of his large fortune to you, as residuary legatee. Our client was of somewhat eccentric habits, but we have no reason to doubt his disposing power at the date of the will, nor do we at present

apprehend any attempt to dispute the said will, since Mr. Milford leaves no near relations.

"We shall be glad to see you, either here or at your own residence, at your earliest convenience.

"We have the honour to be, sir,

"Yours, etc., etc.,

"CRAFTON AND CRANBERRY."

Hillersdon turned the letter over and over in his hands, as if expecting that solid sheet of paper to change into a withered leaf under his touch; and then he burst into a laugh, as loud but not as joyous as Jermyn's gnome-like mirth.

"A trick," he cried, "a palpable trick, of the fate-reader, hypnotist, whatever he may please to call himself. A cruel jest, rather; to mock parched lips with the promise of the fountain; to exercise his fancy upon a destitute man. Well, I am not to be caught so easily. The churl whose remnant of life I saved at Nice was no wealthy banker, I'll be sworn, but some impecunious nobody who was soured by losses at Monte Carlo."

He looked at his watch. Half-past five. A good many hours must pass before it would be

possible to discover the existence or non-existence of Crafton and Cranberry, and the authenticity of the letter on the table there, where he had flung it, a most respectable looking letter assuredly, if looks were anything to the purpose.

"Easy enough for him to get a lawyer's clerk to write on the firm's paper," he thought. Yet it were a hazardous thing to be done by any clerk, unless a discarded servant.

"How did he know?" mused Hillersdon. "It was after midnight I told him my adventure at Nice, and this letter was delivered by the last post at ten o'clock."

It was not impossible, though, for Jermyn to have heard of the old hunks at the Nice Station from Gilbert Watson, Hillersdon's friend, who had seen the end of the adventure, and heard the old man clamouring for his umbrella. Watson was a man about town, and might have been in contact with Jermyn, who was a season celebrity, and went everywhere.

Gerard threw himself dressed upon his bed, slept a troubled sleep in briefest intervals, and lay awake for the rest of the time between half-past five and half-past eight, when his servant Dodd—

an old retainer, who had married and outlived the rectory nurse—brought him his early cup of tea and prepared his bath. He was dressed and out of doors by half-past nine, and a hansom took him to Lincoln's Inn Fields before the stroke of ten.

The office was evidently just opened, a most respectable office. An elderly clerk showed Mr. Hillersdon into a handsome waiting-room, where the newly-cut newspapers were systematically arranged upon a massive mahogany office table. Neither of the principals had arrived from their West End houses.

Gerard's impatience could not brook delay.

"Do you know anything about this letter?" he asked, showing the open document.

"I ought, sir, for it was I who wrote it," answered the grey-haired clerk.

"By way of a practical joke, I suppose," said Hillersdon grimly, "to oblige a facetious friend."

"Messrs. Crafton and Cranberry do not deal in practical jokes, sir," replied the clerk, with dignity. "I wrote that letter at Mr. Crafton's dictation, and if you are the Mr. Hillersdon there referred to it really ought to be a very pleasant letter for you to receive."

"Very pleasant, if I could venture to take it seriously."

"Why should you suspect a jest, sir, in so grave a matter, and coming to you from a firm of undoubted respectability?"

Hillersdon sighed impatiently, and passed his hand across his forehead with a troubled gesture. How did he know that this scene of the lawyer's office, the letter in his hand, the grey-haired, grave old clerk talking to him, were not part and parcel of some hypnotic vision, no more real than the figure of the girl at the sewing-machine which those same eyes of his had looked at last night. He stood irresolute, incredulous, silent, while the old clerk deferentially awaited his pleasure. The outer door opened as he stood there, and the measured footsteps of dignified middle-age crossed the hall.

"Mr. Crafton," said the clerk. "He will be able to assure you that there has been no jesting, sir."

Mr. Crafton entered, tall, broad, bulky, imposing, faultlessly dressed for his *rôle* of man of the world, not unaccustomed to society, and trustworthy family lawyer.

"Mr. Hillersdon, sir," said the clerk. "He has been disposed to think that the letter from the firm was a practical joke."

"I am hardly surprised at your incredulity, Mr. Hillersdon," said the solicitor, in an unctuous and comfortable voice, calculated to reassure desponding clients. "That letter may well take your breath away. A romance of real life, isn't it? A young man does a plucky thing on the spur of the moment, thinks no more about it, and some years after wakes up one morning to find himself—a very rich man," concluded Mr. Crafton, pulling up suddenly, as if he might have used a much bigger phrase. "Kindly step into my private room. You can bring us the copy of the will, Coxfield."

The clerk retired, and Mr. Crafton ushered his visitor into a large front office, as imposing as his own figure.

"Pray be seated, Mr. Hillersdon"—waving his hand towards a spacious arm-chair. "Yes, the whole story comes within the region of romance; yet it is not the first time in testamentary history that a large fortune has been left to a stranger as a reward for some service barely acknowledged

when it was rendered. Our late client, Mr. Milford, was a curious man. I'll warrant now he took very little trouble to show his gratitude when you had hazarded your life in his service."

"The only trouble he took was about his umbrella, which he was vociferously anxious to recover."

"So like him, dear old man. A character, my dear sir, a character. You wouldn't have given twenty shillings for the clothes he wore that day, I dare say—umbrella included."

"If clothes and umbrella had been on my premises, I would have given ten shillings to get them taken away."

"Precisely," exclaimed the lawyer, with his genial chuckle. "A very remarkable man. I doubt if he paid his tailor ten pound a year—or five. Yet a man of large benevolence, a man whose left hand knew not what his right hand gave. But now we have to come to the crucial question. Can you establish your identity with the Gerard Hillersdon whose name our late client took down from Mr. Gilbert Watson's dictation in the station at Nice."

"Very easily, I think. In the first place, I

doubt if there is any other Gerard Hillersdon in the directory, as the name Gerard comes from my mother's side of the house, and was not in the Hillersdon family before I was christened. Secondly, my friend Watson is now in London, and will readily identify me as the man about whose name your client inquired when I had left the platform. Thirdly, it would be easy, were further evidence needed, to establish the fact that I was residing at the Hôtel Mont Fleuri, Cannes, at that date, and that I went to Nice on the first day of the Carnival."

"I do not think there will be any difficulty as to identity," Mr. Crafton replied suavely. "Your present address is the same as that which Mr. Watson gave our lamented client, and he further described you as the son of the Rector of Helmsleigh, Devon, a detail no doubt elicited by Mr. Milford's inquiry. Here is a copy of the will. You would like to hear it, perhaps," suggested Mr. Crafton, as the clerk entered and laid the document before him.

"Very much."

Mr. Crafton read in a clear, distinct voice and with great unction. The will was dated six

months previously, and was made at Nice. It opened with a long list of legacies, to old servants, to the clerks in three banking-houses, in London, Marseilles, Nice, to numerous charities, to Mr. Crafton and his partner, Mr. Cranberry. Hillersdon sat aghast as he heard thousands and fives and tens of thousands, disposed of in this manner. To the Hospital for Children, Great Ormond Street, ten thousand; five thousand to St. George's Hospital; a thousand each to ten Orphanages; five thousand to a Convalescent Hospital; three thousand to an Asylum for the Blind. Would there be anything left for him after this lavish distribution? The passage in the will which concerned himself came at last, and was simple and brief. "Finally, I bequeath the residue of my estate, real and personal, to Gerard Hillersdon, younger son of the Rev. Edward Hillersdon, Rector of Helmsleigh, Devon, in recognition of his generosity and courage in saving my life at the hazard of his own in the railway station in this place, on the 14th of February, 1879, and I appoint James Crafton, Solicitor, of 190, Lincoln's Inn Fields, sole executor of this my will."

"It is a noble reward for an action to which I never attached the slightest importance," said Hillersdon, pale to the lips with suppressed emotion. "I saw a young man at Newton Abbot do almost as much to save a dog, which was running up and down the line, scared by the porters who shouted at him. That young man jumped down upon the metals and picked up the dog in front of the engine—somebody else's cur, not even his own property. And I—because in common humanity I plucked an old man from instant death—yes, it was a near shave, I know, and might have ended badly for me—but it was only instinctive humanity, after all—I am left a fortune. It is a fortune, I suppose?"

"Yes, Mr. Hillersdon, a large fortune—something over two millions, consisting of lands, houses, consols, bank stock, railway and other shares, together with the sole interest in the firm of Milford Brothers, Bankers, of London, Marseilles, and Nice.

Hillersdon broke down utterly at this point. He turned his face from the spectators, principal and clerk, and fought hard with himself to keep

back a burst of hysterical tears mixed with hysterical laughter.

"It is too ridiculous," he said, when he had recovered his speech. "Yesterday I was in the depths of despair. It is real, isn't it?" he asked piteously. "You are not fooling me—you are real men, you two, not shadows? This is not a dream?"

He struck his hand on the table so heavily as to produce severe pain.

"*That* is real, at any rate," he muttered.

Solicitor and clerk looked at each other dubiously. They were afraid their news had been too sudden, and that it had turned this possible client's head.

"Advance me some money," asked Hillersdon abruptly. "Come, Mr. Crafton, give me your cheque for a good round sum, and when I have cashed that cheque I shall begin to believe in Mr. Milford's will and in your good faith. I am up to my eyes in debt, and it will be a new sensation to be able to pay the most pressing of my creditors."

Mr. Crafton had his cheque-book open and his pen dipped in the ink before this potential client had done speaking.

"How much would you like?" he asked.

"How much? Would five hundred be too large an advance?"

"A thousand, if you like."

"No, five hundred will do. You will act as my solicitors, I suppose—carry through this business for me. I am as ignorant of the law as the sheep who provide your parchment. I shall have to prove the will I suppose. I haven't the faintest notion what that means."

"That will be my duty as executor. Our firm will settle all details for you, if you have no family lawyer whom you would prefer to employ."

"I don't care a rap for our family lawyer. He has never done anything to endear himself to me. If you were good enough for Mr. Milford—my benefactor—you are good enough for me. And now I'll go and cash this cheque."

"Will you allow our messenger to do that for you?"

"Thanks, no. I like the sensation of a bank counter when I have money to receive. How will I have it? A hundred in tens, the rest in fifties. How I shall astonish my worthy land-

lord! Good day. Send for me when you want me to execute deeds, or sign documents."

He went out on to the sunny pavement where the hansom was waiting for him; went out with a step so light he was scarcely conscious of the pavement under his feet. Even yet he could scarcely divest himself of the idea that he was the sport of dreams, or of some strange jugglery worked by the man with the light-blue eyes and the uncanny laugh.

He drove to the Union Bank, in Chancery Lane cashed his cheque, and then drove about the West End, to tailor, hatter, hairdresser, hosier, paying fifties on account. He had only a hundred and fifty left when he got back to his lodgings, and out of this he paid his landlord a hundred. The remaining fifty was for pocket-money. It was such a new sensation to have satisfied his creditors, that he felt as if he were made of air. He was convinced of the fact now. This thing was a reality. Fortune had turned her wheel—turned it so completely that he who had been at the bottom was now at the top. What would his own people think of this wonder that had befallen him? A millionaire! he, the thriftless

son, who had until now been only a burden and a care to father and mother. He would not write. He would run down to Devonshire in a day or two, and tell them this wonderful story with his own lips.

And but for Justin Jermyn's interference he would have shot himself last night, and would have been lying stark and stiff this morning. Yet, no, the letter was delivered at his lodgings last night, at ten o'clock. Fortune had turned her wheel. The tidings of her bounty were waiting for him while he was fooling in the Fate-reader's room, the sport of a shallow trickster.

"And yet he seemed to know," thought Hillersdon; "he hinted at a change of fortune—he led me on to talk of the old man at Nice."

He felt a sudden desire to see Jermyn, to tell him what had happened; to talk over his monstrous luck; to see what effect the news would have upon the Fate-reader. There were other people he wanted to see—most especially Edith Champion—but the desire to see Jermyn was the strongest of all. He got into a cab, and told the man to drive to Holborn.

He hadn't the remotest idea whereabouts in

Holborn that old Inn was situated, or whether in any adjacent thoroughfare. He dismissed his cab at Warwick Court, and went about on foot, in and out of dingy old gateways, and in all the "dusty purlieus of the law," as existent in the neighbourhood of Holborn; but nowhere could he find gate-house, or semi-deserted inn that in any wise resembled the place to which Jermyn had taken him last night.

After nearly two hours of ineffectual exploration he gave up the search, and drove to the West End, where, at the Sensorium, a smart dilettante club of which he was a member, he hoped to hear Jermyn's address. It was tea-time, and there were a good many men in the reading-room and adjacent smoke-room, and among them several of Hillersdon's friends.

He sat down in the midst of a little knot of acquaintances, and ordered his tea at a table where he was welcomed with marked cordiality—welcomed by men who knew not that they were welcoming a millionaire.

"You know everything that's going on, Vane," he said, to one of these; "so of course you know Jermyn, the Fate-reader?"

"Intimately. It was I who secured him for Lady Fridoline yesterday. He doesn't, as a rule, show himself at the common or garden-party, but he went to Fridoline House to oblige me."

"Will you tell me where he lives?"

"Nowhere. He is much too clever to put an address on his card, like a commonplace individual. He is to be heard of here, or at the Heptachord. He is a member of both clubs, though he rarely shows at either—but as to an address, a vulgar lodging-house address, like yours or mine. *Pas si bête!* If he put anything on his card it would be Styx, or Orcus."

"My dear fellow, I supped with him last night at his chambers."

"Then you know where they are?"

"That is exactly what I do not know. Jermyn insisted upon my going to supper with him last night after the opera. We walked from Covent Garden to his chambers. We were talking all the time, and except that we passed through Queen Street and Lincoln's Inn Fields, I haven't an idea as to what direction we took, or where the curious shabby old Inn is situated."

Youth's frank laughter greeted this avowal.

"Then all I can say, my dear Hillersdon, is that you were rather more 'on' than a man generally is when he leaves the opera. You were very lucky to get out of Bow Street."

"Would you be surprised to hear that I had taken nothing stronger than Salutaris at dinner, and nothing whatever after dinner? No, wine had nothing to do with my mental condition. Jermyn and I were talking. I was in a somewhat dreamy mood, and allowed myself to be piloted without taking any notice of the way we went. I will own that when I left him at four o'clock this morning my head was not quite so clear, and London might be Bagdad for all I know of the streets and squares through which I made tracks for Piccadilly."

"So Jermyn entertains, does he?" exclaimed Roger Larose, the æsthetic architect, and elegant idler, a man who always looked as if he had just stepped out of one of Marcus Stone's pictures, "this must be inquired into. He has never entertained me. Was your drunkenness a pleasant intoxication? Was his wine irreproachable?"

"More, it was irresistible. He gave me some old Madeira that was like melted gold, and his

champagne had the cool freshness of a wild rose, an aroma as delicate as the perfume of the flower."

"I believe he hypnotised you, and that there was nothing; or perhaps bread and cheese and porter," said Larose. "Where are you going, and what are you going to do this afternoon? I've some Hurlingham vouchers in my pocket. Shall we go and see the polo match, or shoot pigeons, and dine on the lawn?"

A thrill went through Hillersdon's heart at the thought that yesterday, had Larose made such a proposition, he would have been obliged to decline, with whatever excuse he might invent on the spur of the moment. Yesterday the half-guinea gate-money and the risk of being let in to pay for the dinner would have made Hurlingham forbidden ground. To-day he was eager to taste the new joy of spending money without one agonising scruple, one pang of remorse for extravagance that meant dishonesty.

"I am going to call on some ladies," he said. "If you can give me a couple of ladies' tickets and one for myself, I will meet you in time for dinner."

"Do I know the ladies? Is Mrs. Champion one of them?"

"Yes."

"Delightful—a *parti carré*. It is going to be a piping night. We will dine on the lawn, hear the chimes at midnight, stealing softly along the river from the great bell at Westminster. We will fancy we see fireflies and that Fulham is Tuscany—fancy ourselves in the Cascine Gardens, which are not half so pretty as Hurlingham or Barn Elms, when all is said and done. Get along with you, Hillersdon. In spite of your debauch you are looking as happy as if you had just had a fortune left you."

Gerard Hillersdon laughed somewhat hysterically, and hurried out of the club. He had not the courage to tell any one what had happened to him—not yet. That word hypnotism frightened him, even after this seemingly substantial evidence of his good luck. The lawyer's office, the bank, the notes, and tradesmen's receipts! Might not all these be part and parcel of the same hypnotic trance. He pulled a bundle of receipted accounts out of his pocket. Yes, those were real, or as real as anything can be to a

man who dares not be sure that he is not dreaming.

He drove to Hertford street. Mrs. Champion was at home, and alone. Her carriage was at the door ready to take her to the Park. Mrs. Gresham was again engaged in the cause of the Anglican Orphans, serving tea and cake to the shilling people on the second day of the bazaar at the Riding School, and was to be called for at six o'clock.

Mrs. Champion was sitting in a darkened drawing-room, in an atmosphere of tropical flowers, dressed in India muslin, the room and the lady alike suggestive of coolness and repose after the glare and the traffic of the streets. She looked up from her book with a start of surprise at hearing Hillersdon's name.

"I thought you were half way to Germany by this time," she said, evidently not ill-pleased at his return, as it were a bird fluttering back to the open door of his cage, "but perhaps you missed your train and are going to-morrow."

"No, Mrs. Champion, I changed my mind, and I am not going at all."

"How nice," she said sweetly, laying aside her

book and preparing to be confidential. "Was it to please me you stayed?"

He made up his mind that he must tell her His mouth grew dry and hot at the very thought; but he could not keep the knowledge of his altered fate from this woman who had been, who was still, perhaps, the other half of his soul.

"For once in my life," he said quietly, "or let me say for once since I first met you—your wish was not my only law. Something has happened to me—to change my life altogether since yesterday."

That hoarse broken voice and the intensity of his look scared her. Imagination set off at a gallop.

"You are engaged to be married," she cried rising suddenly out of her low chair, straight as a dart, and deadly pale. "These things always end so. You have been loyal to me for years, and now you have grown weary, and you want a wife—Elaine instead of Guinevere—and you meant to run away to Germany and break the thing to me in a letter—and then you changed your mind and took courage to tell me with your own false lips."

This burst of passion—her white face and flashing eyes—were a revelation to him. He had thought her as calm and cold as a snow figure that children build in a garden; and behold he had been playing with fire all this time.

He was standing by her side in an instant, holding her icy hands, drawing her nearer to him.

"Edith, Edith, can you think so poorly of me? Engaged! Why you know there is no other woman I care for—have ever cared for. Engaged, in a day, in an hour! Have I not given you my life? What more could I do?"

"You are not! Oh, thank God. I could bear anything but that."

"And yet—and yet—you hold me at arm's length," he said fondly, with his lips near hers.

She was the snow figure again in a moment, standing before him in her matronly dignity, cold, proud, unapproachable.

"I was foolish to put myself in a passion," she said, "and, after all, whenever you want to marry I shall have no right to hinder you. Only I should like to know your plans in good time, so

that I may accustom myself to the idea. The horses have been at the door ever so long, and that hard working Rosa will be waiting for me. Will you come for a drive round the Park?"

"I shall be charmed; but I want you and Mrs. Gresham to dine with me at Hurlingham. We can go on there when you have done your Park."

"I don't care a straw for the Park. Let us go straight to Hurlingham and see the Polo. But I am so carelessly dressed; shall I do, do you think, or must I put on a smarter gown?"

She stood up before him in a cloud of muslin and lace, a gown so flowing and graceful in its draping over bust and hips, that it might have been a cloud of spray clothing a nymph at a fountain.

"Your careless costume is simply perfection. Only be sure and bring a warm wrap, for we may be sitting late upon the lawn."

She touched a spring bell, and her maid appeared with a white Gainsborough hat and a pair of long suede gloves. Wraps were sent for, the butler was informed that his mistress would not dine at home, and the barouche drove off

with Gerard on the front seat, opposite Mrs. Champion.

"What can have happened to change your life, if you are not going to be married?" she asked, as they turned into Piccadilly. "You mystify me. I hope it is nothing bad—no misfortune to any of your people?"

"No, it is something distinctly good. An eccentric old man, whom I was once so fortunate as to oblige, has left me the bulk of his fortune."

"I congratulate you," she said; but there was a troubled look in her face that surprised him.

Surely she ought to be glad.

"Does that mean that you are a rich man?" she asked, after a pause.

"Yes, I am a rich man."

"How rich?"

"As rich as anybody need care to be. I am told that the fortune left me is something over two millions."

"Two millions of francs?"

"Two millions sterling."

"Good heavens! Why Champion is a pauper compared with you. This is too absurd!"

"It does savour of the ridiculous, I admit," said

Hillersdon, somewhat piqued by her manner of treating the subject. "Poverty was my *métier* no doubt. I was born to be a hanger-on upon the great world; to taste its pleasures by the favour of other people; to visit in smart houses on sufferance; to live in a shabby lodging and find my warmest welcome at a club."

"Two millions!" repeated Edith. "I am sure James has not as much. Two millions! You will have to marry now, of course."

"Have to! Why should I be constrained to marry just when I have the means of enjoying a bachelor's life?"

"You will be made to marry, I tell you," she answered impatiently. "You don't know what women are who have daughters to marry. You don't know what girls are—hardened worldly girls, in their third or fourth season—who want to secure a rich husband. You can't possibly estimate the influences that will be brought to bear upon you. All the spinsters in London will be at your feet."

"For the sake of my two millions. Are women so mercenary?"

"They are obliged to be," answered Edith

Champion. "We live in an age in which poverty is utterly intolerable. One must be rich or miserable. Do you think I would have consented to marry Mr. Champion, in spite of all the pressure my family put upon me, if I had been brave enough to bear poverty with you. No, to be well born means the necessity of wealth. One's birthright is to belong to the smart world, and to be poor in that world is to be a social martyr. I have often envied the women born at Camberwell or Islington; the women who go to the butcher's to buy the dinner, and who wear cotton gloves."

"Yes, there is an independence in those lower depths. One can be poor and unashamed, if one belongs to the proletariat. But be assured, my dear Mrs. Champion, that I shall not fall a victim to a manœuvring mother or an enterprising young lady. I shall know how to enjoy wealth and freedom."

Edith sighed. Would not the independence of unlimited wealth tempt her slave to throw off the yoke? Could he ever be again—he the millionaire—what he had been to her? Would he be content to dance attendance upon her, to be

at her beck and call, an inevitable guest at all her parties, to hand tea-cups at her afternoons when he was perhaps the only man present, to fetch and carry for her, find her the newest books in French and German, taste them for her before she took the trouble to read them, keep her posted in the gossip of the clubs, so far as such gossip was fitting for a lady to know? For the last three years he had been her second self, had supplemented her intellect and amused her leisure. But would he be content to play the satellite now that wealth would give him power to be a planet, with moons and satellites of his own?

"He will marry," she told herself. "There is no use talking about it. It was easy to keep him in leading-strings while he was too poor to be worth any marriageable girl's attention. But now he will be forced into marriage. The thing is inevitable."

The carriage stopped at the Riding School, and the footman went in to look for Rosa Gresham, who came tripping out presently, airily dressed as befitted the summer solstice, and somewhat purple as to complexion.

"We are going to take you to dine at Hurlingham," said Edith.

"How awfully good of you. I am dead beat. The shilling people were too horrid—staring, and pushing, and squabbling for their right change, and gobbling cake in a revolting manner. I don't think our stall can have cleared its expenses. How well you are looking this afternoon, Mr. Hillersdon, and yesterday I thought you looked dreadful, so hollow under the eyes, so pale and haggard."

"I thought I was going away, to part company with all I cared for," said Gerard.

"And now you are not going?"

"No," Edith answered, with a laugh which was not altogether joyous. "He may well look different. Though form and feature are unchanged he is a different man. Rosa, you are sitting opposite a millionaire."

"Heavens! Do you really mean it, or is it a joke?"

"I hope and believe that it is serious. I have the assurance of a dry-as-dust solicitor that there is as much money in the world, and that it belongs to me. And I cannot even thank the

man who gave it me, for the hand that gave it is in the dust."

"And to think that you never came to our Bazaar, never gave one thought, in the midst of your prosperity, to the Anglican Orphans!" exclaimed Rosa.

CHAPTER V.

LIFE UPON NEW LINES.

THE nightingales were gone, but the roses were left, and it was pleasant to sit on the lawn and hear the plash of the tide, and see the stars come slowly out, large and red in the smoke-tainted atmosphere, above the tufted elms of Hurlingham. Roger Larose talked his best in that dim light, and Gerard, who had been silent and moody at the little dinner in Hertford Street yesterday, was to-night as joyous as the thrushes that were singing their evening hymn in the cool dusk of deserted shrubberies. And all the difference—the difference between despair and gladness, between gloom and mirth, between eager delight in life and dull disgust, had been brought about by the most sordid factor in the sum of man's existence—filthy lucre.

No matter the cause when the effect was so enchanting. Gerard's elation communicated itself to his companions. More champagne was consumed at that little table in the garden than at any other party of four in the club, and yet the house was crowded with diners, and there were other groups scattered here and there, banqueting under the roof of heaven. Lightest talk and gladdest laughter beguiled the hours till nearly midnight, when Mrs. Gresham remembered an early celebration at a ritualistic temple in Holborn, and entreated to be taken home at once, so that she might secure certain hours of pious seclusion before dawn.

Gerard had requested that no word of his altered fortunes should be spoken before Roger Larose. Roger and the rest of the world would hear all about his good luck in due course; but he shrank from the idea of endless congratulations, very few of them cordial and disinterested. Time enough when the inexorable *Illustrated London News* had acquainted society with the particulars of Mr. Milford's will.

The two women behaved with discretion, and although Larose wondered a little at the superb

indifference with which Hillersdon paid for the dinner, and left the change of a ten-pound note to the waiter, knowing that of late his friend had suffered from youth's common malady of impecuniousness, he ascribed this freedom only to some windfall which afforded temporary relief.

On their way to the carriage Mrs. Gresham contrived to get Hillersdon all to herself, while Larose and Mrs. Champion walked in advance of them.

"Dear Mr. Hillersdon, a fortune such as yours is a vast responsibility for a Christian," she began solemnly.

"I haven't looked at it in that light, Mrs. Gresham; but I own that it will take a good deal of spending."

"It will, and the grand thing will be to secure good results for your outlay. There is one good work I should like to introduce to your notice before you are beset by appeals from strangers. The chief desire of my husband's heart, and I may say also of mine, is to enlarge our Parish Church, now altogether unarchitectural and inadequate to the wants of the increased congrega-

tion which his eloquence and strength of character have attracted. In the late incumbent's time the church used to be half empty, and mice ran about in the gallery. We want to do away with that horrid gallery, build a transept which would absorb the existing chancel, and add a new and finer chancel. It will cost a great deal of money, but we have many promises of help if any benefactor would give a large donation—say a thousand guineas—to start the fund in a substantial manner."

"My dear Mrs. Gresham, you forget that I am a parson's son. Dog doesn't eat dog, you know. I have no doubt my father's church needs enlargement. I know it has a pervading mouldiness which calls for restoration. I must think of him before I start your fund."

"If you have not yet learnt how to spend your fortune, you certainly seem to know how to take care of it, Mr. Hillersdon," said Mrs. Gresham, with some asperity; and then recovering herself, she continued airily, "It was rather too bad of me perhaps to plague you so soon, but in the cause of the Church one must ask in season and out of season."

They went through the house and waited in the vestibule while the carriage was brought to the door, and they all went back to town together in the barouche, and wound up with an after-midnight cup of tea in Mrs. Champion's drawing-room, a labyrinth of luxurious chairs, and palms, and Indian screens, and many-shaped tables, loaded with bric-à-brac of the costliest kind, glimmering in the tempered light of amber-shaded lamps.

"I like the French custom of midnight tea," said Larose. "It stretches the thread of life and shortens the night of the brain."

Mrs. Gresham slipped away with ostentatious stealthiness after a hasty cup of tea; but the others sat late, beguiled by the reposeful atmosphere—they three alone in the spacious room, with its perfume of tea-roses and shadow of dark fan-shaped leaves. Edith Champion was not a person of many accomplishments. She neither played nor sang, she neither painted pictures nor wrote verses, preferring that such things should be done for her by those who made it the business of their lives to do them well. But she was past-mistress of the decora-

tive art, and there were few women in London or Paris who could approach her in the arrangement of a drawing-room.

"My drawing-room is part of myself," she said; "it reflects every shade of my character, and changes as I change."

It was past one o'clock when Hillersdon and Larose left Hertford Street. Piccadilly and the Park looked almost romantic in the moonlight. That cup of strong Indian tea had worked the usual effect of such potions, and both men were disinclined to go home to the uninviting seclusion of a lodging-house bedroom.

"Shall we go to the Petunia?" asked Larose, suggesting one of those after-midnight clubs where the society is decidedly mixed, and where the champagne costs twice as much as at the Carlton or the Reform."

"I detest the Petunia."

"The Small Hours, then? They are giving really good music now, and we can get devilled bones or a lobster to our supper."

"Thanks, no; I have had enough of society—even yours, which is always delightful. I am going for a long walk."

"That is a safe way of getting rid of me," answered Larose. "I never walk a furlong further than I am absolutely obliged. Hansom."

His lodgings were in George Street, Hanover Square, hardly a profitable shilling's worth, but it was not in Larose's temperament to consider shillings, until he had spent his last. There were intervals when he was without even the indispensable shilling for a hansom.

"And a good thing, too," said one of his friends, on hearing that hansoms were impossible, "for then you are obliged to walk."

"Obliged!" cried Larose. "Marry! what should oblige me to do anything I don't like doing. No lesser person than 'the blind fury with the abhorred shears.' When I can't afford cabs I take to my bed, lie a-bed all day reading Ruskin, or dreaming of Coptic churches and Moorish interiors, and get up at dusk and make a ground plan or sketch a façade, in my dressing-gown, while the housemaid arranges my room. In these intervals I live upon biscuits and soda-water, like Byron, and I emerge from my retirement a renovated and rejuvenated man. Thus do I make necessity my nurse, and profit by

propulsion," concluded the architect, who had a knack of sham quotation.

Hillersdon was glad to see the cab go swinging round into Bond Street with his vivacious friend. He wanted to be alone. He had taken a curious fancy into his head, which was to renew his search for the curious old Inn where he had supped last night. He fancied that he might be able to hit upon the place if he approached it under the same conditions of darkness and the comparative solitude of night. He had failed utterly to find the old gate-way in the glare of day; yet the fabric must exist somewhere within narrow limits. The whole thing—the house to which he was taken—the room in which he sat—the wine he drank—could not be a vision of the night. Granted that the face of the girl was a hallucination put upon him by a clever mesmerist, other things must have been real. He could not have wandered in the streets of London for three or four hours in a mesmeric trance, full of vain imaginings. No, his memory of every detail, of every word they two had spoken, was too distinct to be only the memory of a dream.

He walked to Bow Street, and from Bow Street

went in the direction in which he had gone on the night before with Justin Jermyn. After he left Lincoln's Inn Fields he tried to abstract his mind and to walk without thought of the way he was going, hoping that instinct might direct his steps in the way they had gone last night, the same instinct by which a horse who has travelled a road only once will make every turn accurately upon a second journey.

Instinct gave him no help. He wandered up and down Holborn, he explored the side streets that lie right and left of Gray's Inn Lane, he threaded narrow courts and emerged into Hatton Garden, he went back to the Lane and hugged the dingy wall of Verulam Buildings; but nowhere did he see gate-house or archway that bore the faintest resemblance to the gate-house beneath which he passed last night. He began to think that he had been verily upon enchanted ground, and that the champagne he had drunk with Justin Jermyn was akin to that juice of the grape which Mephistopheles drew from an augur hole in a wooden table. There was devilry in last night's business somewhere or somehow.

He went back to his lodgings mystified and

dispirited. He forgot that he was a millionaire, and over the scene of life there crept once again that dreary neutral hue which it had worn when he contemplated making a sudden irrevocable exit from the stage. It was three o'clock before he got to Church Court, half-past three before he flung himself wearily upon his jingling brazen bed.

"I must move into better rooms on Monday," he said to himself, "and I must think about getting a house of my own. What is the use of wealth if one doesn't enjoy it?"

There was very little enjoyment in him this summer morning, when the clear bright light stole into his room, and accentuated the shabbiness of the well-worn furniture, the hideous Philistinism of the maple wardrobe, with its Corinthian columns and tall strip of looking-glass, glass in which he had critically surveyed his dress-suit the other evening, wondering how long it would hold out against the want of confidence among west-end tailors. He could have as many dress suits as he liked now, and could pay as much as the most egregious tailor cared to demand. He could live where he liked, start

his house and his stable on a footing worthy of Nero or Domitian. He could do what he liked with his life, and the world would call it good, would wink at his delinquencies and flatter his follies. All that the world has of good lay in the hollow of his hand, for are not all the world's good things for sale to the highest bidder? He reflected upon this wondrous change in his fortunes, and yet in this morning hour of solitude and silence the consciousness of illimitable wealth could not bring him happiness.

There had always been a vein of superstition in his nature, perhaps; or superstitious fears would scarcely have troubled him in the midst of his prosperity. His double attempt to find Jermyn's chambers and his double failure had disconcerted him more than such a thing should have done. The adventure gave a suggestion of *diablerie* to his whole history since the moment when Jermyn read his secret design in the library at Fridoline House.

He could not sleep, so he took down the "Peau de Chagrin" from the bookcase which held his limited library, composed of only that which he held choicest in literature. One could have read

the bent of his mind by looking at the titles of those thirty or forty books. Goethe's Faust, Heine's poetry and prose, Alfred de Musset, Owen Meredith, Villon, Gautier, Balzac, Baudelaire, Richepin; the literature of despair.

He read how when the lawyer brought Raphael the news of his fortune, his first thought was to take the "Peau de Chagrin" from his pocket and measure it against the tracing he had made upon a table-napkin the night before.

The skin had shrunk perceptibly. So much had gone from his life in the emotions of a single night of riot, in the shock of a sudden change in his fortunes.

"An allegory," mused Hillersdon. "My life has been wasting rapidly since the night before last. I have been living faster, two heart-throbs for one."

He breakfasted early after two or three hours of broken sleep, and dawdled over his breakfast, taking up one volume after another with a painful inability to fix his mind upon any subject, until the inexorable church bells began their clangour close at hand, and made all thought impossible.

Then only did he remember that it was Sunday

morning. He changed his coat hurriedly, brushed his hat, and set out for that fashionable temple in which Edith Champion was wont to hear the eloquent sermons of a "delicate, dilletante, white-handed priest," in an atmosphere heavy with Ess bouquet, and the warm breath of closely-packed humanity.

The choir was chanting the "Te Deum" when he went in, and secured one of the last rush-bottomed chairs available in the crowded nave. His night wanderings had fatigued him more than he knew, and he slept profoundly through one of the choicest discourses of the season, and was not a little embarrassed when Mrs. Champion and Mrs. Gresham insisted upon discussing every point the preacher had made. Happily, both ladies were too eager to state their own opinions to discover his ignorance, or to guess that for him that thrilling sermon had been as the booming of a bumble bee in the heart of an over-blown rose — a sound of soothing and pleasantness.

"He goes to the Riviera every winter," said Mrs. Champion, slipping from the sermon to the preacher; "he is more popular there than in

London. You should hear his thrilling denunciation of Monte Carlo, and his awful warnings to the people who go there. There is hardly standing room in any church where he preaches."

Hillersdon walked in the Park with the two ladies, patiently enduring that customary church parade which always bored him, even in Edith Champion's company, and even although his pride was stimulated by being seen in attendance upon one of the handsomest women in London.

The Park looked lovely in the summer noontide, the people were smart, well-dressed, admirable; but the park and the people were the same as last year, and they would be the same next year—the same and always the same.

> "It is the constant revolution stale
> And tasteless, of the same repeated joys,
> That palls and satiates, and makes languid life
> A pedlar's pack, that bows the bearer down."

He dined with Mrs. Champion, and went to a musical party with her, and that Sunday seemed to him one of the longest he had ever spent, longer even than the Sabbath days of his boyhood, when he was allowed to read only good books, and forbidden all transactions with rat-catchers and ferrets.

He was glad when he had handed Mrs. Champion to her carriage under an awning in Grosvenor Place, glad to go back to his bachelor loneliness, and impatient of Monday morning. He was up betimes, and hurried off to Lincoln's Inn Fields as soon as it was reasonable to expect Mr. Crafton at his office. He wanted again to assure himself that Ebenezer Milford's fortune was a reality, and not a dream.

The solicitor received him with unimpaired graciousness, and was ready with offers of assistance in any plans of his client. All that had to be done about the inheritance was in progress; but as all processes of law are lengthy it would be some little time before Mr. Hillersdon would be in actual possession of his wealth.

"The succession duties will be very heavy," said Crafton, shaking his head; and Hillersdon felt that in this respect his was a hard case.

"Have you communicated with your friend, Mr. Watson?" the lawyer asked presently.

"No, I forgot to do that."

"It would be as well that you should look him up at once, and test his memory of the occurrence in the railway station," suggested Crafton. "His

evidence would be very useful in the—most unlikely—contingency of any attempt to upset the will."

This remark had the effect of a douche of cold water upon Hillersdon.

"You don't apprehend——" he faltered.

"No, I have not the slightest apprehension. Poor old Milford was an isolated being. If he had any relations I never heard of them. But, as a precautionary measure, I advise you to see your friend."

"Yes, yes, I will go to him at once," said Hillersdon feverishly, getting up and making for the door.

"There is no need for hurry. Is there nothing that I can do for you?"

"Nothing. I have been thinking of changing my lodgings—but that can stand over for a few days. I must see Watson—and then I must go down to the country to see my own people. It wouldn't do for them to hear of my good luck from any one else. I may tell them, I suppose? I am not likely to find myself thrust out of this inheritance after a few weeks' possession? I am not going to be a kind of Lady Jane Grey among legatees?"

"No, no; there is really no danger. The will is a splendid will. It would be very difficult for any one to attack it, even the nearest blood relation. I have not the slightest fear."

"Give me your cheque for another five hundred, by way of backing your opinion," said Hillersdon, still feverishly, and with a shade of fretfulness.

He was irritated by the mere suggestion that a will is an instrument that may be impeached.

"With pleasure," replied Mr. Crafton, ready with his cheque book; "shall I make it a thousand?"

"No, no, a monkey will do. I really don't want the money, only I like to see you part with it freely. Thanks; good day."

His hansom was waiting for him. He told the man to drive to the Albany, where he might utilise his call upon Watson by making inquiries about any eligible rooms.

It was early in the day, and Watson was lingering over his breakfast, which had been lengthened out by the skimming of half-a-dozen morning papers. He had not seen Hillersdon

for some time, and welcomed him with frank cordiality.

"What have you been doing with yourself all this time?" he asked, as he rang for fresh coffee. "You've been moving in Mrs. Champion's charmed circle, I suppose, and as her orbit ain't mine we don't often meet, and now we do meet I can't compliment you on your appearance. You are looking uncommonly seedy."

"I have been sleeping badly for the last few nights. That's my only ailment. Do you remember that evening at Nice when you went to the station with me after the battle of flowers?"

"And when you picked a churlish old fellow from the front of an advancing engine, and to all intents and purposes saved his life. Of course I remember. A curious old man, that. I believe he means to leave you a legacy of some kind. Nineteen pounds nineteen, perhaps, to buy a mourning ring. He was monstrously particular in his inquiries about—your name and parentage, and usual place of abode. He walked half the length of the Avenue de la Gare with me, and he was very much troubled in mind about his umbrella."

"Did he tell you his name?"

"He gave me his card at parting, but I lost the card and forgot the name.

"And you really believe that I saved his life?"

"I don't think there's the slightest doubt about it. The thing was as near as a toucher. I expected to see you killed in an unsuccessful attempt to save him."

"And you would put as much as that in an affidavit, or say as much in the witness-box?"

"In a dozen affidavits, or in a dozen witness-boxes. But why these questions?"

Hillersdon told him the motive, and the fortune that was at stake.

"Then the legacy comes to two millions," cried Watson. "By Jove, you are a lucky fellow, and upon my honour you deserve it. You hazarded your life, and what can any man do more than that, and for an unknown traveller. The good Samaritan goes down to posterity on the strength of a little kindly feeling and twopence. You did a great deal more than the Samaritan. Why cannot I pluck a shabby Crœsus out of the iron way, or rescue a million-

aire from drowning? Why should this one lucky chance come your way and not mine? You were only ten paces in advance of me when the crucial moment came. Well, I won't grumble at your good fortune. After all, the accession of one's bosom friend to millions makes one's self no poorer. Yet there is always a feeling of being reduced to abject poverty when a friend tumbles into unexpected wealth. It will take me months to reconcile myself to the idea of you as a millionaire. And now what are you going to do with your life?"

"Enjoy it if I can, having the means of enjoyment given me."

"All that money can do you can do," said Watson, with a philosophic air. "You will now have the opportunity of testing the power of wealth, its limitations, its strictly finite nature."

"I will not moan if I find there are some things gold cannot buy," said Hillersdon. "There are so many things it can buy which I have been wanting all my life."

"Well, you are a lucky fellow, and you deserve your luck, because you did a plucky thing without thought or fear of consequences.

If you had paused to consider your own peril that old man would have been smashed."

The servant came in with the coffee, a welcome interruption to Hillersdon, who was tired of being complimented on his pluck. His early breakfast had been only a cup of tea, and he was not sorry to begin again with Watson, who prided himself upon living well, and was a connoisseur of perigord pies and York hams, and took infinite pains to get the freshest eggs and best butter that London could supply.

"Well, you are going to enjoy your life; that is understood. Imprimis, I suppose you will marry?" said Watson, cheerily.

"I told you, I meant to enjoy my life," answered Hillersdon. "The first element of happiness is liberty. And you suggest that I should start by surrendering it to a wife?"

"Oh, that's all bosh. A man with a big income does not lose his freedom by taking a wife. In a millionaire's household a wife is only an ornament. She has neither control nor ascendancy over his existence. You remember what Beckford said of the Venetian nobility at the close of the eighteenth century. Every great

man in that enchanting city had his secret tabernacle—a snug little nest in the labyrinth of narrow streets, or in some shadowy bend of a rio, known only to himself and his intimates, where he might live his own life, while his ostensible existence as Grand Seigneur was conducted with regal pomp and publicity in his palace on the Grand Canal. Do you suppose the Venetian nobleman of that golden age was governed by his wife? *Pas si bête.*"

"I shall never marry till I can marry the woman I love," answered Hillersdon.

Watson shrugged his shoulders significantly, and went on with his breakfast. He knew all about Mrs. Champion, and that romantic attachment which had been going on for years, and which seemed as hopeless and almost as unprofitable upon Gerard Hillersdon's side as Don Quixote's worship of Dulcinea del Toboso. Watson, who was strictly practical, could not enter into the mind of a man who sacrificed his life for a virtuous woman. He could understand the other thing—life and honour, fortune and good name, flung at the feet of Venus Pandemos. He had seen too much of the influence of base

women and ignoble love to doubt the power of evil over the hearts of men. It was the namby-pamby devotion, this lap-dog love, the desire of the moth for the star, in which he could not believe.

Hillersdon left him in time to catch the Exeter express at Waterloo. He had made up his mind that he must no longer keep his own people in ignorance of the change in his fortunes. He had given the hard-worked father and the long-suffering mother too much trouble in the past, and now the hour of compensation must be no longer delayed. Yes, his father's church should be restored, and the dear old tumble-down Rectory renovated from garret to cellar without injury to its tumble-downness, which was of all things beautiful—a long, low house, with bow windows bellying out unexpectedly; a house so smothered with banksia roses, myrtle, flowering ash, and wistaria that it was not easy to discover whether its walls were brick or stone, rough-cast or cob.

It was a relief to Gerard Hillersdon to turn his back upon London, to feel that his face was set towards green pastures and summer woods, to see

the white fleeces of rural sheep instead of the darklings of the Park, and the frolics of joyous foals in the meadows instead of smart young women bucketting along the Row.

"God made the country and man made the town," he said to himself, quoting a poet whom his father loved and often quoted.

It was still early in the afternoon when he went in at the open gate of the Rectory garden. The estuary of the Exe lay before him, with crisp wavelets dancing in the sun. His father's parish was midway between Exeter and Exmouth, a place of quietness and fertile meadows, gardens brimming over with flowers, thatched cottages smothered with roses and honeysuckle, beehives, poultry yards, and all rustic sights and sounds; a village in which a rector is a kind of king, exercising more influence than parliaments and potentates afar off.

Two girls were playing tennis on the lawn to the right of the long low verandah that screened the drawing-room windows, two glancing figures in white gowns that caught the sunlight. One he knew for his sister Lilian; the other was a stranger.

Lilian faced the carriage-drive by which he approached, recognised him, flung down her racquet with a joyful exclamation, and ran to meet him, heedless of her antagonist.

"I thought you were never coming near us again," she said, when they had kissed. "Mother has been full of anxieties about you. It was time you came; yes, high time, for you are looking dreadfully ill."

"Every one seems bent upon telling me that," he said, with a vexed air.

"You have been ill, I believe, and you never let us know."

"I am as well as I ever was in my life, and I have not been ill. Two or three bad nights seem to have played havoc with my looks."

"It is the horrid life you lead in London—parties every day and every night; no respite, no repose. I hear of your doings, you see, though you so seldom write to any of us. Miss Vere, who is staying with me, knows all about you."

"Then Miss Vere possesses all knowledge worth having—from my point of view. I dare say she knows more about me than I know of

myself. You shall introduce me to her, after I have seen my mother."

"You shall see mother without one moment's waste of time. Poor mother, she has so pined for you. Mother," called Lilian, addressing her fresh young voice to the verandah, "Mother, come out and be startled and delighted in a breath."

Gerard and his sister were moving towards the house as she called. A tall matronly figure emerged from the verandah, and a cry of gladness welcomed the prodigal son. In the next minute he was clasped to his mother's heart.

"My dearest boy."

"My ever dear mother."

"I have been so anxious about you, Gerard."

"Not without cause, dear mother. I was in very low spirits, altogether at odds with fortune a few days ago. But since then I have had a stroke of luck. I have come to tell you good news."

"You have written another book," she cried delightfully.

"Better than that."

"Nothing could be better than that, to my mind."

"What would you say if a good old man, whom I only saw once in my life, had left me a fortune?"

"I should say it was like a fairy tale."

"It is like a fairy tale, but I believe it is reality. I believe, because a London solicitor has advanced me a thousand pounds with no better security than my expectations. I have not sold my shadow, and I have not accepted the *Peau de chagrin*. I am substantially and realistically rich, and I can do anything in the world that money can do to make you and father and Lilian happy for the rest of your lives."

"You can give me a new racquet," said his sister. "It is a misery to play with this, and Barbara has the very latest improvement in racquets."

"'My mother had a maid called Barbara,'" quoted Gerard laughing. "Miss Vere is your Barbara, I suppose?"

He went into the drawing-room with his mother, while Lilian ran to apologise to Miss Vere for her sudden desertion. Mother and son sat side by side, hand clasped in hand, and

Gerard told her the strange history of his altered fortunes. He told her of his debts and of his despair, his utter weariness of life; but he did not tell her that he had contemplated suicide; nor did he fling across her simple thoughts the cloudy mysticism which has become a factor in modern life. He did not tell her of the scene in Jermyn's chambers, or of his vain endeavours to discover the whereabouts of those chambers; nor did he talk to her of Edith Champion, albeit she had some inkling of that romantic phase of his life.

She was enraptured at the thought of his good fortune, without one selfish consideration of the prosperity it would bring to her. In the midst of her rejoicing she began to talk to him about his health.

"You are not looking well, dearest," she said earnestly. "To those who love you your health is of far more importance than your fortune."

This harping on an unpleasant strain irritated him. This was the third time within the day that he had been told he looked ill.

"You women are all morbid," he said. "You poison your lives with unrealised apprehensions.

If any one gave you the Koh-i-noor you would make yourselves miserable by the suspicion that it was only a bit of glass. You would want to break it up in order to be sure of its value. Suppose I have a headache—suppose I have had two or three bad nights, and am looking haggard and pale, what is that against two millions?"

"Two millions! Oh, Gerard, is your fortune anything like that?" asked his mother, in an awe-stricken voice.

"I am told that it is very much like that."

"It sounds like a dream. There is something awful in the idea of such wealth in the possession of one young man. And oh, Gerard, think of the thousands and tens of thousands who are almost starving."

"I suppose everybody will tell me that," exclaimed her son irritably. "Why should I think of the starving thousands? Why, just because I have the means of enjoying life, am I to make myself miserable by brooding upon the miseries of others? If it comes to that a man ought never to be happy while there is a single ill-used cab-horse in the world. Just think of all the horses in London and Paris that are under-

fed and over-driven, and have galled shoulders and cracked heels. There is madness in it. Think of the ill-treated children, the little children, the gutter martyrs, whose lives are a burden. If we are to think of these things our choicest luxuries, our most exalted pleasures, must turn to gall and wormwood. For every pair of happy lovers there are women in degradation and despair, and men whose lightest touch is defilement. If we stop to consider how this world we live in—so full of exquisite beauty and eager joyous life—is just as full of want and misery and crime, the sharp anguish of physical pain, and the dull agony of patient, joyless lives, there can be no such thing as pleasure. We must not give way to pity, mother. Since we cannot heal all these gaping wounds—since there is no possible panacea for the sufferings of a universe, we must narrow our thoughts and hopes to the limits of home and family, and say 'Kismet, Allah is good.' But for you, dearest, for you and all whom you want to help, my wealth shall be as potent as the four-leaved shamrock. You shall be my almoner. You shall find out which among all the never-ending

schemes for helping the helpless are really good, and sound, and honest, and I will aid them with open hand."

"My dear son, I knew your heart was full of pity," murmured his mother tenderly.

"Oh, but I don't want to pity any one. I want you, with your clear, calm mind, to think and act for me. Everybody tells me I am looking haggard and ill, now just when life is worth cherishing. I want to avoid overmuch agitation. Let us talk of happier things. How is the dear governor, or the Rector, as he prefers to be called?"

"He has not been very well of late. Last winter tried him severely."

"He must spend next winter at San Remo or Sorrento. It will be only for you both to choose your locality."

"And I may see Italy before I die," gasped the Rector's wife, whose peregrinations hitherto had rarely gone beyond Boscastle on the one side and Bath on the other, with a fortnight in London once in two years.

"Yes, you shall see all that is fairest in this world," answered Gerard.

"Your father is spending the day in Exeter.

What a delightful surprise for him when he comes home to dinner. But you must not wait for eight o'clock, Gerard. You must have something after your journey. Shall I order a chop, or a grilled chicken?"

"No, dear mother, I am too happy in your company to want such substantial food. I think I saw cups and saucers in the garden, under our favourite tree—

> 'And thou in all thy breadth and height
> Of foliage, towering sycamore.'"

"Oh, Gerard, it is a tulip-tree. Your father would be dreadfully offended to hear it called a sycamore. Yes, you shall have some tea, dearest." She rang the bell, and ordered new-laid eggs, hot cakes, a regular Yorkshire tea, to be taken out to the garden. "What happiness to be sitting there with you once again. It is ages since you have been with us, except for just that hurried visit last Christmas."

Gerard sighed as he acknowledged the force of this reproach. All his summers of late years had been spent far afield. In the Tyrol, in Scotland, in Sweden, in Westmoreland, at Carlsbad, anywhere whither Mrs. Champion's caprices or Mr.

Champion's "cure" led the lady and her satellite. He had enjoyed no more independent existence than one of Jupiter's moons, but had been constrained to revolve in the orbit of his planet.

He went into the garden with his mother. Every shrub was a reproach, for all had grown with the growth of years since he had seen them in their summer glory. A flying visit at Christmas or the New Year had been as much as his goddess allowed him. And now—albeit his chain was unbroken—he had a feeling that it was lengthened, and that he was going to do as he liked henceforward.

The stout, comfortable-looking butler, whom he remembered a lad in buttons, brought tea, and toasted cakes, and poached eggs, and clouted cream, and other rustic luxuries; and the tennis players, who had taken one tea at four o'clock, were very glad to take another at six. Gerard was introduced to Miss Vere, otherwise Barbara —a girl with a handsome face and a commanding figure, but who looked as if she had *vecu*, Gerard thought, and who at once began to talk of the houses at which they had met in London, which were all the smartest houses, be it remarked.

The young lady sunk any lesser mansions at which they might have rubbed shoulders.

"I think you know Mrs. Champion," Miss Vere remarked innocently. "She and my cousin, Mrs. Harper, are great chums."

"Mrs. Theodore Harper?"

"Yes, Mrs. Theodore."

"I know her well, a very pretty woman."

"Yes, she is by way of being a beauty," said Miss Vere, who was much handsomer, and no doubt was fully aware of her superiority; "but don't you think she's rather silly about that boy of hers—taking him everywhere?"

"Upon that point I consider her positively imbecile. A child in an Eton jacket should not be obtruded upon the society of reasonable men and women. I believe she only takes him about with her in order that people may exclaim, 'Your son, Mrs. Harper? Impossible! How could you have a son of twelve years old, when you can be at most two-and-twenty?"

"And then she smiles—carefully—through her magnolia bloom, and is perfectly happy for the rest of the afternoon, while the boy sits turning over illustrated books, and boring himself to death."

"Or sucking surreptitious lollipops, till some prosy old Etonian goes and sits beside him, and talks about the playing fields and the river," said Gerard.

Lilian and her mother sat smiling at this conversation, happily unconscious of its artificiality. Lilian, who was lily-fair and guileless as a child, looked up to Barbara Vere with eyes of admiring wonder. Miss Vere's exquisitely fitting gowns, her aplomb, and her knowledge of the side scenes of life commanded the village maiden's respect. To talk to a girl who had the peerage at her fingers' ends, knew to a shade every important person's political opinions, was familiar with all the society scandals and all the approaching alliances, was a privilege for the Rector's daughter. She wondered how the brilliant Barbara could endure the jog-trot domesticity of the Rectory, and it had never occurred to her that Barbara Vere put in for repairs at this quiet little harbour after the wear and tear of her annual voyage on the high seas of London society.

"I feel so fresh and so happy when I am with you," said Barbara. "I leave my French maid and my powder-box in London, and

steep myself in the atmosphere of Milton's 'Allegro.'"

She might have added that in this clerical seclusion she did not trouble to make up her eyebrows, or to put on just that one artistic touch of rouge upon the cheek-bone, which in London drawing-rooms gave lustre to her fine dark eyes. Here her life was spent for the most part in a garden, and she was wise enough to know how ghastly all artificial embellishments become under such conditions.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FACE IN THE VISION.

The little party of four sat long at the tea-table under the leafy branches of the tulip-tree. The Rectory garden was on a level stretch of ground; but beyond the shrubbery that girdled lawn and parterre, the glebe meadows sloped towards the low, irregular cliff; and below the undulating line of the cliff danced the bright wavelets of the estuary. The garden and its surroundings were alike lovely, fertile, smiling—not the grand scenery of North Devon, nor the still bolder coast-line of North Cornwall, by that steep rock where once uprose Tintagel's crown of towers, but a placid and pastoral region which seems to invite restfulness and content with things that be, rather than soaring aspirations or heroic endeavour.

Landward of the Rectory garden and orchard

there rose a wooded hill, whose summit commanded a fine view of the channel, and the white-winged ships sailing away towards Start Point. That hill, with its wood and coppice, had been Gerard's delight in the summer holidays of boyhood. He had read there in his long vacations —and there were spots which to this hour recalled certain passages in Homer and Virgil, and certain difficulties in higher mathematics.

He thought of that far-off time as he sat, sipping a third cup of tea, in a dreamy mood, after having done scanty justice to the plethora of rustic fare. The two girls had gone indoors, leaving mother and son *tête-à-tête*, Mrs. Hillersdon sitting silent, plying those busy needles which knitted socks for half the old men and children in the parish, and Gerard lost in reverie. He was the first to break the silence.

"Mother, I saw a face the other day which reminded me of home—and of—ever so many years ago—five or six years, at least—and yet I can't associate the face with any one in this parish. I can't tell you how familiar it seemed, or how I have worried my brains to find out where and how I saw it."

"A man's face, or a woman's?"

"A girl's face—or rather say the face of a woman of three or four and twenty—a woman in humble life. It must have been one of your cottagers, but I can't identify her. It is a very lovely face."

"But where did you see this young woman? Why didn't you question her?"

"The face flashed upon me and was gone. There was no time for asking questions. I want you to help me, if you can. So lovely a face must have made some impression upon you. Think of the prettiest girls you have known in this village and the surrounding neighbourhood."

"There are so many pretty girls. Devon is famous for beauty. A good many of the cottagers about here have given me their photographs. People are very fond of being photographed now that the luxury is so cheap. I have an album that I keep on purpose for my parish friends. You can look through it this evening, if you like, and see if you can identify your young woman."

"She would not be one among a herd," Gerard answered irritably. "I know what Devonian

beauty means—bright blue eyes, fine carnations. This girl is utterly unlike the type. Surely you can remember a girl of exceptional beauty, with whom we had some kind of association any time within the last ten years, but whom I must have seen seldom, or I should be able to identify her?"

"Exceptional beauty!" repeated Mrs. Hillersdon, thoughtfully. "I can recall nobody in the parish whom I should call exceptionally beautiful. But men have such odd notions about beauty. I have heard a girl with a snub nose and a wide mouth extolled as if she were Venus. Why are you so anxious to know more about this young woman?"

"I have reason to think she is in distress, and I should like to help her—now that I am rich enough to do foolish things."

"It would not be foolish if she is a good girl—but beware of exquisite beauty in humble life, Gerard. It would make me miserable if——"

"Oh, my dear mother, we have all read 'David Copperfield.' I am not going to imitate Steerforth in his treatment of little Emily. I am mystified about this girl, and I want to learn who she is and whence she came."

"Not from this parish, Gerard, I am sure, unless you can find her in my album."

"Let me see your album, this minute," cried Gerard.

The parlourmaid approached as he spoke, and began to clear the tea-table.

"Run to my room and bring me the big brown photograph album," said Mrs. Hillersdon, and the brisk young parlourmaid tripped away and presently returned with a brown quarto which had seen long service. Gerard turned the leaves eagerly. He beheld a curious collection of old-fashioned finery, mushroom hats, crinolines, Garibaldi shirts, festoons, flounces, and Maria-folds, polonaises, jackets, mantles, of every style that has been worn within the last thirty years—old men and maidens, fathers, mothers, children, babies in abundance.

There were plenty of pretty faces—faces which even the rustic photographer could not spoil; but there was not one which offered the faintest resemblance to the face he had seen in Justin Jermyn's chambers.

"No!" he exclaimed, flinging the book upon the table in disgust, "there is no sign of her among your bumpkins."

"Please don't sneer at my bumpkins. You don't know what good, bright, patient, hard-working creatures there are among them, or how proud I am to know that they are fond of me."

"The girl I saw has an ethereal face—not flesh, but spirit—dreaming eyes, large and soft, shadowed by long dark lashes—fair hair, not golden, mark you—but distinctly fair, a pale soft brown, like the coat of a fallow deer. Her features are exquisitely delicate, modelling of nose and chin like a Madonna by Raffaelle—yes, it is a Raffaelle face, so soft in colouring, so spiritual—but sad, unutterably sad."

"Hester Davenport," exclaimed Mrs. Hillersdon, suddenly. "You have described her to the life. Poor girl. Where did you meet her? I thought she was in Australia."

"Perhaps only in a dream. But who is Hester Davenport?"

"Don't you remember the curate, Nicholas Davenport, the man whom your father engaged without adequate scrutiny into antecedents or character, on the strength of his fine manner and appearance, and his evident superiority to the common run of Churchmen—a man of great

theological learning, your father told me. He had been tutor to Lord Raynfield's son—in Cumberland—and he gave your father a letter of recommendation from Lord Raynfield, dated some seven years before he came to us. You know how unsuspicious your father is. It never occurred to him that the man's character might have changed since that letter was written. He was with us a year and a half, and towards the end of that time his daughter came from Hanover, where she had been sent for a year or so to learn German. We were all struck with her beauty, and sweet gentle manners."

"Yes, yes, I remember now. I was at home when she arrived. How could I forget? She came to tea with Lilian one afternoon when I was loafing about the garden, and I talked to her for five minutes or so, not more, for I had to hurry off to catch the train for Exeter. I saw her once after that—met her on the sands one morning. Yes, the face comes back to me as it was then—in all the freshness of girlhood."

"She was only seventeen when she came from Germany."

"And Davenport went wrong, turned out an incorrigible drunkard, did he not?"

"Yes; it was unspeakably sad. He used to have occasional lapses—never during his church work—but when he was about in the parish. He told your father that he suffered from slight attacks of epilepsy; so slight as to be of no hindrance to his duty. This went on for over a year, and then, on All Saints' Day, he had an attack in the reading-desk—a lapse of consciousness as your father called it. He seemed very strange. We were puzzled—but none of us guessed the dreadful truth, till one Sunday evening, about a month after his poor daughter came home from Germany, he went up into the pulpit, reeling, and clutching at the balustrade, and began to preach in the wildest language, uttering dreadful blasphemies, and bursting into hysterical laughter. Your father had to go up into the pulpit with one of the churchwardens and bring him down by main force. He was perfectly mad; but it was drink, Gerard, drink, that had caused all the evil. He had been taking brandy or chloral for years—sometimes one, sometimes the other. He was a secret

drinker—that learned, intellectual man, a man who had taken the highest honours at Oxford, a man whom Oxford men remembered as a light among them."

"What became of him after that?"

"He had to leave us, of course, and as your father dared not recommend him to anybody, and as the scandal of his behaviour had been heard of throughout the diocese, there was no hope of his getting any further employment in the Church. Your father was very sorry for him, and gave him a little money to help him to emigrate. His old pupil, Lord Wolverley, helped him, and old college friends contributed, and he and his daughter sailed for Melbourne. I went to Plymouth to see them off, for I was very sorry for the poor motherless girl, in her deep distress, and your father and others wanted to be sure that they really got off, as Davenport was a shifty kind of man, and might have let the ship sail without him. They went out in a sailing vessel, crowded with first, second, and third-class emigrants. They went second-class, and I can see her now as I saw her that day, standing in the bows with her hand through her

father's arm, while he waved his handkerchief to me. She was white and wan, poor child, but exquisitely lovely. I could not help thinking of what her life might have been if she had had good and prosperous parents; yet I know she adored that unhappy father."

"Exquisitely lovely, yes," mused Gerard, "and going out to a new world in an emigrant ship, and with a drunken old man for her only guardian and stay. A hard fate for exquisite loveliness, is it not, mother? And now, I believe she is in London, working at a sewing-machine for starvation wages."

"But how came you to learn so much, and yet not to know more?"

"Did I not tell you that it was a dream?" he asked, with a mocking smile! "But I mean to know more, mother; I mean to find this girl by hook or by crook, and to help her!"

"You must not mix yourself in her life, Gerard," said Mrs. Hillersdon, gravely; "that might end badly."

"Oh, mother, you are full of fears! One would think I were Mephistopheles, or Faust; while all I want is that my money may be of

some use to a friendless girl. Hester Davenport! I remember how lovely I thought her, but I was no more in love with her than with the Venus of the Capitol. Strange that I should have failed to identify the face, till you helped me!"

He went indoors with his mother, and found his room—the room which had been his ever since he left the nursery—ready for occupation. The old nursemaid, whom he had teased and joked with in the old Marlborough holidays, had bustled and hurried to get Mr. Gerard's room aired and dusted, and his portmanteau unpacked, and all things arranged before the dressing-bell rang out from the old wooden cupola that crowned the low roof. Everything had the odour he knew so well—a perfume of lavender and dried rose leaves, mixed with some strange Indian scent which was an inheritance from his mother's side of the house, her people having been civilians of good standing in Bengal for half a century. It was a curious composite perfume, which for him meant the atmosphere of home, and brought back memories of childhood.

The Rector received the news of his son's

altered fortunes at first with incredulity, and then with gladness mingled with awe.

"The whole business seems too wonderful to be true, Gerard," he said; "but if it really is true, you are just the luckiest fellow I ever heard of—to inherit an old man's wealth without ever having cringed to him or fawned upon him while he was alive—to receive two millions sterling, without having to say thank you, except to Providence!"

The Rector was by no means a selfish man, and he had been an indulgent father, bearing with a good deal of extravagance and some perversity on the part of his son, but he was not slow to see that this fortune must needs mean comfort and luxury for him in his declining years, and a freedom from financial cares which would be new to himself and his wife, liberally as the Rectory was administered. His living was worth seven hundred a year, and he and his wife between them had about four hundred of independent income; and it is not easy for a man of good family and with refined tastes to live within an income of eleven hundred a year, especially when he is rector of a rural

parish in which the lower orders look to him for aid in all their necessities, while the surrounding gentry expect him to play an equal part in all their sports and hospitalities.

Gerard stayed with his people just two days. That was as much time as he could spare for inaction, since there was upon him the natural restlessness of a man whose fortunes have undergone a sudden and wondrous change, and who is eager to put newly acquired power to the test. Father, mother, and sister would gladly have kept him longer in that rural paradise, and Barbara Vere, having got wind of his inheritance, exercised all her blandishments, her spells of woven paces and of weaving hands, to bind him to her side. Garden, and hills, and rustic lanes, and summer sea, were all suggestive of restfulness and oblivion of the busy world;—but a young man who has just come into a fortune is no more to be satisfied with indolence in a garden than Eve was. He too, like Eve, longs to taste the fruit of the fatal tree.

"I have seen what life is like to a man who never has a spare five-pound note," Gerard told

his sister; "I want to find out how life tastes to a millionaire. And when I have furnished rooms or a house, and have settled down a little, you must come and keep house for me, Lilian——"

"Nonsense, dear! You will be marrying before the year is out."

"I have no idea of marrying. There is nothing so unlikely as my marriage. You shall be mistress of my house."

"I couldn't leave mother—at least, not for ever so long," said Lilian.

"In years to come she will need you more than she needs you now. I begin to understand you, Lilian. That tall ill-looking curate—Mr. Cumberland—has something to do with your hesitations."

"Do you think him so very ugly?" asked Lilian, with a distressed look.

"I didn't say very ugly; but I certainly don't think him handsome. That knotted and bulging brow means brains, I suppose."

"He was fifth wrangler, and he is a splendid musician," said his sister. "I wish you would stop till Sunday to hear what he has made of the choir."

"If he has made them sing in tune he must be a wonderful man. And so he is the person whose merits and fortunes are to colour your future, Lilian. I had no idea of it when I saw him hanging over your piano last night. I thought he was only a *pis-aller*. I suppose he is just the type of man girls in country parsonages admire—tall, athletic, with fine eyes, and dark overhanging brows, large strong hands, thick wavy hair, and a powerful baritone voice. I can quite understand your liking Mr. Cumberland; but what does the governor think of it all?"

"Father does not mind," Lilian answered naively, "Jack is of very good family, but he will have to get a living before we are married."

"He shall have a living—if he is worthy of my sister," said Gerard. "Money will buy livings—he shall be a pluralist if he likes."

"Oh, Gerard, he is the last man to like that. He has such a strong idea of duty. He would like a big parish in a sea-port, I think, with plenty of work. His best gifts are wasted in such a place as this, but all our people adore him. Father owns that he never had such a helper."

"My sweet enthusiast, we will look out for a

big sea-port. You shall be a ministering angel to sailors and sailors' wives—you shall temper the cruelties of life in a crowded city—and, perhaps, by way of reward I shall hear some day that my sister's husband has been struck down by a malignant fever and that she has done herself to death while nursing him."

CHAPTER VII.

"IT IS AN OATH," SHE SAID.

GERARD went back to London, but eager as he was to return he felt a pang of regret as he bade his mother good-bye in the fresh early morning, and turned his face towards the great city. His brief visit to the old home had been an interval of rest in a life that lately had been all unrest. He fancied that *peau de chagrin* could hardly have shrunk by a hair's breadth during those hours of calm affection, of interchange of thought and feeling, without vehemence or excitement. To go back to Mrs. Champion and her set was like going back to the crust of a volcano. The rage of spending was upon him. He wanted to do something with the money which he had scarcely dared to calculate. He drove straight from Waterloo Station to Lincoln's Inn, and went through the schedule of his possessions with Mr.

Cranberry, who was a little dry old man, like the Princess Ida's father, and had none of the prestige and unctuousness of his junior partner Mr. Crafton. One could divine easily that while Mr. Crafton lived in a handsome "place" at Surbiton, grew pines and peaches, and prided himself upon his stable and garden, Mr. Cranberry was content with a dingy house in one of the Bloomsbury Squares, and restricted his pride of life to a few Dutch pictures, a good plain cook, and a cellar of comet port and old East Indian sherry.

From this gentleman Gerard Hillersdon elicited —together with much detail—the main fact that his capital, in and out of the banking-house of Milford and Co., summed up to a little over two millions, and might be taken to yield an average four and a half per cent., whereby his annual income amounted to ninety thousand pounds.

His cheek paled at the mere mention of the sum. It was too much undoubtedly, almost an evil thing to acquire such riches with a suddenness as of an earthquake or an apoplectic stroke. The magnitude of his wealth overawed him ; and yet he had no desire to lessen it by any large act of benevolence or philanthropy. He had no

inclination to give the London slums another breathing ground, or to sink a hundred thousand pounds upon a block of dwellings for the abjects of the great city. He was at once scared and elated.

"Let me have a few thousands immediately," he said; "open an account for me at Milford's bank. Let me feel that I am rich!"

"It shall be done," replied Mr. Cranberry; and then he explained that there were certain formalities to be gone through, which could be completed without delay, if his client would give his mind to the business.

The two men drove round to the bank together. Cranberry opened his client's account with his own cheque for five thousand pounds, and a clerk handed Mr. Hillersdon a cheque-book. His first act on returning to his lodgings was to write a cheque for a thousand pounds, payable to the Rev. Edward Hillersdon, and this he enclosed in a brief scrawl to his mother:

"Ask the Rector to buy Lilian a new pony to replace poor Tiny Tim, who has taken to stumbling rather badly," he wrote, "and beg him to do just what he likes with the rest of the

money. I shall send you my little gift upon your birthday next week. Alas! I let the date slip by last year, unmarked by so much as a card."

It was too late to begin his search for a new domicile that afternoon, so he called on Mrs. Champion, who had gone to Charing Cross Station to meet her husband on his return from the Continent, and then he went on to the pretty little Sensorium, with its old-fashioned low-ceiled rooms, and bow windows looking into Birdcage Walk, and there he took tea with Roger Larose, who was generally to be found there at tea-time.

"I hear you have come into a fortune," said Larose, with his easy languor. "You have been trying to keep the fact dark, I know, but these things always ooze out."

"Who told you?"

"Nobody. It is in the air. I think I read a paragraph in the *Hesperus*. There are always paragraphs. I congratulate you upon your wealth. Is it much?"

"Yes; it is a good deal. My old friends needn't be afraid of borrowing a few pounds of me when they are hard up."

"Thanks, my dear Gerard. I will bear it in mind. And what are you going to do? Shall you really be content to live among us, and know us still?"

"The world and the people I know are quite the best world and people I have ever imagined; only I mean to have pleasant surroundings. Give me your counsel, Larose, as an architect and a man of taste. Shall I have chambers in the Albany, or a house and garden of my own?"

"A house, by all means! The Albany is old-fashioned; it savours of Pelham and Coningsby. You must have a house near the south side of Hyde Park,—a house in a walled garden. There are few such houses left now, and yours will be fabulously dear. That, of course, is a necessity. You must get an R.A. to decorate your walls. The President won't do it, but you must have an R.A."

"Thanks, I have my own ideas about decoration and furniture."

"And you don't want an R.A.? Extraordinary young man! However, your garden will be the grand point,—a garden in which you can entertain, a garden in which you can breakfast or dine

tête-à-tête with your chosen friend, or with the select few. In London there is nothing like a garden for distinction. The costliness of it always tells. Sit down and write to a house-agent at once: some one near the Park. Messrs. Barley and Mennet? Yes, they will do. Tell them exactly what you want."

The letter was written at Larose's dictation—a house of such and such elevation; between Knightsbridge and the Albert Hall; stabling ample, but not too near the house; garden of at least an acre indispensable.

Messrs. Barley and Mennet's answer came by the eleven o'clock post on the following morning. They were pleased to state that by a happy conjunction of events—namely, the sudden death of a client, and his widow's withdrawal to the Continent—they had now at their disposal just such a house and grounds as Mr. Hillersdon required. Such houses Messrs. B. and M. begged to remind Mr. H., were seldom in the market; they were as precious and as rare in their line as the Koh-i-noor or the Pitt diamond. The price asked for the beneficial lease of seventy-three and a quarter years was thirty thousand pounds, a

very reasonable amount under the circumstances. The annual ground rent was two hundred and fifty pounds. The auctioneers enclosed a card to view, and Hillersdon set off at once, eager to see if the house realised their description. When he found himself in Piccadilly he thought he would ask Edith Champion to go and look at the house with him. The attention would please her, no doubt; and he had a vague feeling of remorse on her account, as if—although he had called on her yesterday—he had neglected her. Certainly under the old conditions he would have gone back to Hertford Street in the evening, instead of wandering from theatre to music-hall, and from music-hall to post-midnight club, with Roger Larose.

There were two carriages, a victoria and a pair-horse brougham, standing before Mr. Champion's house: a curious circumstance at that early hour. It occurred to Gerard that they looked like doctors' carriages, and the idea struck him with a sudden dread. Could anything evil have happened? Could she, whom he last saw splendid in health and beauty, have been stricken with sudden illness?

He asked the servant who answered his ring if Mrs. Champion was ill.

"No, sir, not Mrs. Champion," the man answered promptly; "Mr. Champion came 'ome out of 'ealth, and there's been two doctors with 'im for the last 'arf-hour. Will you step up to the drawing-room, sir? My mistress is in the libery with the doctors, but I dare say she'll see you presently."

"Yes, I'll wait. I hope Mr. Champion is not seriously ill?"

"No, sir. Only a general derangement, I believe. He has been complaining for some time. Master is getting on in years, you see, sir," added the butler, with the privilege of an upper servant.

Getting on in years? Yes, James Champion was no doubt upon the downward slope of the hill, but until this moment Gerard had never thought of him as mortal, as a factor that might some day vanish out of the sum of Edith's life. The man seemed fenced round and protected by his wealth, and no more subject to sickness or death than a money-bag.

He was shown into the drawing-room, where

the palms and flowers and innumerable prettinesses scattered about the tables were dimly seen in the tempered light. No broad sunshine ever glared into Mrs. Champion's rooms. Only under the lower edge of the festooned silken blinds was the brightness of the summer day allowed to filter through a screen of yellow marguerites that quivered and glanced in the noon-day light.

Gerard had the room to himself for nearly twenty minutes by the clock, and was beginning to lose patience, and to contemplate departure, when the portière was pushed aside and Edith Champion came into the room, dressed in a white muslin breakfast-gown, and with a face that matched her gown.

She came slowly towards him, as he advanced to meet her, looking at him with a curious earnestness.

"How pale you are," he said. "I was shocked to hear that Mr. Champion was ill. I hope it is nothing serious?"

"It is serious; very serious!" she said, and then she put up her hands before her face, and tears streamed from between her jewelled fingers. "I am thinking how good he has been to

me—how liberal, how indulgent, and how little I have ever done for him in return," she said, with unaffected emotion. "I am full of remorse when I think of my married life."

"My dear Edith," he said, taking her hand; "Indeed you wrong yourself. You have done nothing of which you need be ashamed."

"I have always tried to think that, on my knees in church," she said. "I have taught myself to believe that there was no guilt in my life. Indeed, it seemed blameless compared with the lives of women I know; women with whom the world finds no fault. But I know now that I have been a wicked wife."

"But, Edith," returning naturally to the habit of a former time in his compassion for her grief, "you have never failed in your duty. There has been no shame in our friendship. It was natural that you and I, who are young, and who were once lovers, should take pleasure in each other's society. Mr. Champion has seen us together; he has never suspected evil."

"No; he is utterly without jealousy or suspicion. Perhaps that is because he has never really cared for me," she said, as if reasoning

with herself. "But he has been always kind and indulgent, ready to gratify my lightest whim. And now I feel that I have been cold and ungrateful, indifferent to his feelings and inclinations, going my own way in blind self-indulgence."

"My dear Edith, be assured this remorse is uncalled-for. You have been an excellent wife for Mr. Champion, who—who is not an emotional person, and would be only bored by a romantic affection. But is the case really so bad? Is your husband dangerously ill?"

"The case is hopeless. He cannot live long —perhaps a year, at most two years. He has known for some time that he was out of health. He consulted a doctor in Brussels, who rather scared him by his hints of evil. He came home out of spirits, very desponding about himself, and last night he sent for his doctor, and arranged a consultation with a specialist for this morning. Both doctors have been with me, telling me much more than they dared tell my husband. They have spoken fair words to him, poor dear man, but they have told me the truth. He cannot last more than two years. All that their science

can do, all that healing springs and mountain air, and severe regimen, and careful nursing can do, is to spin out the weak thread of life for a year or two at most. He is only fifty-nine, Gerard, and he has toiled hard for his wealth. It seems cruel for him to be taken away so soon."

"Death is always cruel," Gerard answered vaguely. "I never thought of Mr. Champion as a man likely to die before the Scriptural three-score and ten."

"Nor I," said Edith. "God knows, I have never calculated upon his death."

There was a silence, as they sat side by side, her pale cheeks wet with tears, her hands clasped upon her knee, he sorely embarrassed, feeling all that was painful in their position.

"Is it true about this fortune of yours?" she asked, after a long pause.

"Yes, the thing is a reality. I am beginning to believe in it myself. I came to you this morning to ask you to help me choose a house."

"You are going to take a house," she exclaimed. "That means you are going to be married."

"Nothing of the kind. Why should not a

bachelor, who can afford it, amuse himself by creating a home and a fireside?"

"Oh, I am afraid, I am afraid," she murmured. "I know all the women will run after you. I know how desperate they are when a rich marriage is the prize for which they are competing. Gerard, I think you have cared for me always—a little—in all these years."

"You know that I have been your slave," he answered. "Without any pretensions that could wrong Mr. Champion, I have gone on blindly adoring you—as much your lover as I was before you jilted me."

"Oh, Gerard, I was not a jilt. I was made to marry Mr. Champion. You can't imagine what influences are brought to bear upon a girl who is the youngest member of a large family—the preaching of mother and father, and aunts and uncles, and worldly-wise cousins, and elder sisters. It is the constant dropping that wears out a stone, the everlasting iteration. They told me I should spoil your life as well as my own. They painted such awful pictures of our future—cheap lodgings—exile—and then perhaps the workhouse—or worse, even—suicide. I thought

of that picture in Frith's 'Road to Ruin'—the wretched husband alone in a garret, preparing to shoot himself. Gerard, I thought of you ruined and penniless like that man, contemplating suicide."

Gerard smiled curiously, remembering how only a few days ago he had contemplated, and even resolved, upon that last act in the tragedy of failure.

Edith Champion had risen in her agitation, and was moving restlessly about the room. She turned suddenly in her pacing to and fro, and came towards Gerard, who had taken up his hat and stick, preparatory to departure.

"Tell me once more that you do not mean to marry—yet awhile," she said, with feverish intensity.

"Believe me, there is nothing further from my thoughts."

"And you are not weary of me? I am still as much to you as I was years ago when we were engaged?"

"You are and have been all the world to me since first we met," he answered tenderly.

"Then you can promise me something, Gerard.

If that is true—if I am indeed your only love—it cannot hurt you to promise," she faltered, drawing nearer to him, laying a tremulous hand upon his shoulder, and looking at him with tearful eyes.

"To promise what, dearest?"

"That you will not marry any one else—that you will wait till—till I am free. Oh, Gerard, don't think me cruel because I count upon that which must be. I mean to do my duty to my husband; I mean to be a better wife to him than I have ever been; less selfish, less given over to worldly pleasures, luxury, and show—more thoughtful of him and his comfort. But the end must come before very long. The doctors told me to be prepared. It may come soon and suddenly—it must come before I am two years older. I shall not be an old woman even then, Gerard," she said, smiling through her tears, knowing herself his junior by a year or so, "and I hope I shall not be an ugly woman. Will you promise to wait?"

"Willingly, Edith, were the years ten instead of two."

"Will you promise?"

"Yes, I promise."

"It is an oath," she said. "Say that you will be true to me by all you hold most sacred in this world and the next, as you are a man of honour."

"As I am a man of honour, I will marry you, and none other. Will that satisfy you?"

"Yes, yes!" she cried hysterically; "I am content. Nothing else would have given me peace. I have been tormenting myself ever since I heard of your fortune. I hated the poor old man whose gratitude enriched you. But now I can be at rest; I can trust implicitly in your honour. I can trust you now, Gerard, and I can do my duty to my husband, undisturbed by cares and anxieties about the future. We shall not meet so often as we have done, perhaps. I shall go less into society; my life will be less frivolous, but you will still be *l'ami de la maison*, won't you? I shall see you oftener than any one else?"

"You shall see me as often as you and Mr. Champion choose to invite me. But tell me more about him. Is it the heart that is wrong?"

"Oh, it is a complication—weak heart, overworked brain, gouty tendency, and other com-

plications. You know how strong he looks, what a solid block of a man. Well, he is like a citadel that has been long undermined, which may fall at any time, perhaps without warning, or may crumble slowly, inch by inch. The doctors told me much that I could not understand, but the main fact is only too clear. He is doomed."

"Does he know? Have they told him?"

"Not half what they told me. He is not to be alarmed. Most of the evil has arisen from overwork—the strain and fever of the race for wealth —and while he has been wasting his life in the effort to make money, I have been spending it, oh, how recklessly! I am full of remorse when I think that I have been spending, not money, but my husband's life."

"My dear Edith, it is his *metier*, his one amusement and desire to make money, and as for your extravagance, it has been after his own heart. A less costly wife would not have suited him."

"Yes, that is quite true. He has always encouraged me to spend money. But it is sad, all the same. He did not know that money meant his heart's blood. It has been going drop by drop."

"We spend our lives as we live them, Edith," Gerard answered gloomily. "All strong passion means so much loss. We cannot live intensely and yet live long. You know Balzac's story, 'La Peau de Chagrin.'"

"Yes, yes; a terribly sad story."

"Only an allegory, Edith. We are all living as Raphael de Valentin lived, although we have no talisman to mark the waste of our years. Good-bye. You will come and help me to choose my house, in a few days, will you not?"

"Yes, in a few days. When I have recovered from the shock of this morning."

He went out into the broad bright sunshine, agitated, but by no means unhappy.

It was a relief to see the end of that dubious and not altogether delightful road along which he had been travelling, that primrose path of dalliance which had seemed to lead no whither.

He had pledged himself for life, as surely as if he had vowed the marriage vow before the altar, or allowed himself to be booked and docketted in a registrar's office. For a man of honour there could be no retreat from such a vow. Nothing but shame or death could cancel the promise he

had given. But he had no regret for having so promised. He had no foreshadowing of future evil. He had only confirmed by a vow the bondage into which he had entered years ago, when all life lay new and untried before him. This woman was still to him the dearest of all women, and he was willing to be bound to her.

CHAPTER VIII.

A SHADOW ACROSS THE PATH.

THE house-agents had been more truthful than their kind are wont to be, and the house which Mr. Hillersdon had been invited to inspect more nearly realised their description than houses generally do. Of course it was not all that he wanted; but it possessed capabilities; and it stood in grounds which are becoming daily more difficult to find on the south side of Hyde Park. It was an old house, and somewhat dismal of aspect, the garden being shut in by high walls, and overshadowed by timber; but Gerard was pleased with that air of seclusion which would have repelled many people, and he saw ample scope for improvement in both house and grounds. He closed with the owner of the lease on the following day; and he had Roger Larose at

work upon plan and specification without an hour's delay. The house belonged to the period when all façades of important houses were Italian, and Gerard insisted upon the Italian idea being strictly carried out in the improved front and added wings.

"Let there be no mixture of styles," he said, "that is anathema maranatha in my mind. Above all, be neither Flemish nor Jacobean—the school has been overdone. Let your portico be light and graceful, yet severe; and give me a spacious loggia upon the first floor, between your new wings, which will consist each of a single room — billiard room on one side and music-room on the other.

The delighted Larose assured his client that the Italian school was his passion, and that he, too, was weary of the oriels and bays, the turrets and angles, cupolas and quaintness of the flamboyant Flemish, mis-called Queen Anne. He took his designs to Mr. Hillersdon within twenty-four hours after their inspection of the premises, and the new front and wings looked charming upon paper. There was no question of competition, which would involve delay. Gerard

begged that the designs might be given to the best builder in London, and carried out with the utmost rapidity compatible with good work.

"I must have everything finished before November," he said.

Roger Larose urged that it was hardly possible that two large rooms, and a new façade, with portico, loggia, and classic pediment, to say nothing of various minor improvements, could be completed in so short a time.

"Nothing is impossible to a man of energy, with ample funds at his disposal," answered Gerard. "If your plans cannot be carried out in four months, my dear Larose, they are useless, and I will occupy the house as it now stands."

The commission was too good to be lost, and Larose promised to achieve the impossible.

"I don't believe such a thing was ever done before, except for Aladdin," he said.

"Consider me Aladdin, if you like; but do what I want."

The garden was Gerard's own peculiar care. The landscape gardener whom he called in wanted to cut down at least half the trees—limes and chestnuts of more than a century's growth—

upon the pretence that they darkened the house, and that a smooth lawn and geometrical flower beds were to be preferred to spreading branches under which no turf could live. Gerard would not sacrifice a tree.

"You will lay down fresh turf early in April every year," he said, "and with care we must make it last till the end of July."

The nurseryman booked the order, and felt that this was a customer who deserved his best consideration.

"And you will supply me with palms and orange trees, standard rhododendrons, and other ornamental plants every season. It will be your business to see that they do well while the season lasts."

"Exactly, sir, I perfectly understand your views. The lawn is considerably contracted by that belt of timber, but we can make a fine show of oranges in tubs, standard rhododendrons, and hardy palms in the portico and on the lawn, and you will retain your lime grove, which is, no doubt, an enjoyable feature of the grounds, a remarkable feature in grounds so near London."

For the furnishing of his house Mr. Hillersdon

consulted the man who had dictated her taste to Mrs. Champion. The source of a lady's taste and knowledge becomes forgotten after a year or two, and she takes credit to herself for having evolved her surroundings from her inner consciousness. But on being asked about her views as to furniture, Mrs. Champion suggested the employment of Mr. Callander, a gentleman who made it his business to create homes of taste for those who could afford to carry out his ideal.

"One has ideas of one's own, of course," said Edith Champion. "I was full of original ideas for my drawing-rooms and morning-room, but I found it very difficult to get them carried out. Tradespeople are so stupid. Mr. Callander helped me immensely with drawings and suggestions. In your case I should certainly go to him."

Gerard took her advice, and went to Mr. Callander, of whom Larose declared that he was the only man in London who had any taste in furniture.

To this gentleman the millionaire explained his desires very briefly.

"My house is to be severely Italian," he said

"and I want you to furnish it as if it were a villa between Florence and Fiesole, and as if I were Leonardo di Medici."

"And is expense to be no more considered than if you were one of the Medici?"

"You can spend as much as you like, but you must not make any display of wealth. I have come unexpectedly into a fortune, and I don't want people to point to me as a *nouveau riche*."

"Your house shall be furnished with a subdued splendour which shall make people think that your surroundings have descended to you from a Florentine ancestor. There shall be nothing to suggest newness, or the display of unaccustomed wealth."

"You are evidently an artist, Mr. Callander. Try to realise the artistic ideal in all its purity. But remember, if you please, there are two rooms on the first floor, to the left of the staircase, which I mean to furnish myself, and for which you need not provide anything."

It was now the third week in July, and London was beginning to put on its deserted aspect. Three weeks ago it had been a work of difficulty

to cross from one side of Bond Street to the other; but now crossing the most fashionable thoroughfares was as easy and leisurely a matter as a stroll in daisied meads. Everybody was leaving town or talking of leaving, and dinners and balls were becoming a memory of the past, except such small dinners as may be given to the chosen few during a period of transition. Goodwood was over, and after Goodwood the tocsin of retreat is sounded.

Gerard dined in a party of four in Hertford Street. Mrs. Gresham had returned for a final glimpse of London, after a fortnight's severe duties in her husband's parish. He was Vicar of a curious old settlement in Suffolk, a little town which had been a seaport, but from which the sea had long since retired, perhaps disgusted with the dulness of the place.

She was delighted to see Mr. Hillersdon again, and he could but note the increased fervour of her manner since his improved fortunes.

"I hope you have forgiven me for my premature application about the chancel," she said, plumping herself down upon the causeuse where he had seated himself after talking for a few

minutes with his host. "It was dreadfully premature, I know; but if you could see our dear, quaint, old church, with its long narrow nave and lofty roof, I'm sure you would be interested. Do you know anything about church architecture in Suffolk?"

"I blush to say it is one of the numerous branches of my education which have been neglected."

"What a pity! Our East Anglian churches are so truly interesting. Perhaps you will come down and see us at Sandyholme some day?"

"Is Sandyholme Mr. Gresham's parish?"

"Yes; we have the dearest old Vicarage, with only one objection—there are a good many earwigs in summer. But then our earwigs are more than counterbalanced by our roses. We are on a clay soil, don't you know? I do hope you will come some Saturday and spend Sunday with us. You would like Alec's sermon, I know; and for a little Suffolk town our choir is not so very bad. I give up two evenings a week to practice with them. You will think about it, now, Mr. Hillersdon, won't you?"

"Yes, certainly I will think about it," answered Gerard, meaning never to do more.

He had not been very attentive to the lady's discourse, for his thoughts had been engrossed by Mr. Champion, who was standing on the hearthrug, with his back to an arrangement of orchids which filled the fireplace, and which for a man of chilly temperament poorly replaced the cheery fire. He was indeed what his wife had called him—a solid block of a man, short, sturdy, with massive shoulders and broad chest, large head and bull-neck, sandy-haired, thick-featured, with the indications of vulgar lineage in every detail. A man who had made his own career, evidently, and who had sacrificed length of years in the endeavour to push his way ahead of his fellow-men; a resolute, self-sufficient, self-contained man, proud of his success, confident of his own merits, not easily jealous, but, it might be, a terrible man if betrayed. Not a man to shut his eyes to a wife's treachery, once suspected.

Of ill-health the tokens were of the slightest. A livid tinge under the eyes and about the coarsely moulded mouth, a flaccidity of the

muscles of the face, and a dulness in the tarnished eyeballs, were all the marks of that slow and subtle change which had been creeping over the doomed victim during the last few years, unnoted by himself or those about him.

At dinner the talk was chiefly of the approaching departure. Mr. and Mrs. Champion were going to Mont Oriol.

"You'll look us up there, I suppose, Hillersdon," said Champion; "my wife could hardly get on without you; you are almost as necessary to her as her dachshunds."

"Yes, I dare say I shall find my way to Mont Oriol. I am by nature irresolute. You and Mrs. Champion have often saved me the trouble of deciding on holiday haunts."

"And now that you are rich I suppose you will be idler than ever," suggested Champion.

"Upon my word, no. My case seemed too hopeless for improvement while I was poor, and the stern necessity to earn money benumbed any small capacity I may have had for writing a readable story."

"You wrote one that delighted everybody," interposed Mrs. Gresham, who but dimly remem-

bered the subject of his book, and was hardly sure of the title.

"But now that I need no longer write for bread my fancy may have a new birth. At any rate, it need not dance in fetters."

Mr. Champion went off to his whist club after dinner. He played whist at the same club every evening during the London season, unless peremptorily called upon to accompany his wife to some festive gathering. He was a very silent man, and had never been fond of society, though he liked to have a fine house and a handsome wife, and to give dinners which very respectable, and even smart people, considered it a privilege to eat. His greatest pleasure was found in the city, his chief relaxation at the whist table.

"Don't be late, James," his wife said to him kindly, as he muttered something about stepping round to the club. "Your doctor makes such a strong point of your getting a long night's rest."

"If my doctor could give me the capacity to sleep, I should set a higher value on his advice," said Champion, "but you need not be afraid, I shall be home at eleven."

When Mr. Champion was gone Mrs. Gresham was sent to the piano in the inner drawing-room, and Edith and Gerard were practically *tête-à-tête*. Cousin Rosa was very fond of music, and still fonder of her own playing.

She at once attacked Mendelssohn's Capriccio, while the other two drew nearer to the verandah, and the perfume of the flowers, and the cool, starlit street, and began to talk.

"I have been thinking a great deal about you lately," said Edith, and there was the sound of anxiety in her voice.

"It is very good of you to keep me in your thoughts."

"Good of me! I cannot help myself. If I did not care for you more than I care for any one else in the world, the strangeness of our position would make me think about you. I have been full of such curious thoughts: but perhaps that is only because I have been reading 'La Peau de Chagrin' again, after having almost forgotten the story. It is a horrid story."

"No, no, Edith, a magnificent story, full of the profoundest philosophy."

"No, it is only full of gloom. Why is that

young man to die, simply because he has inherited a fortune? The story is dreadful, like a haunting, horrible dream. I can see that unhappy young man—so gifted, so handsome—sitting face to face with that hideous talisman, which diminishes with his every wish, and marks how his young life is wasting away. I have not been able to get the story out of my mind."

"You are too impressionable, my dear Edith; but I own the story has a gloomy fascination which makes it difficult to forget. It was the book which established Honoré de Balzac's fame, and it seems to me that the hero is only a highly coloured image of the author, who wasted life and genius as feverishly as Raphael de Valentin—living with the same eager intensity, working with the same fervid concentration, and dying in the zenith of his power, though by no means in the bloom of his youth."

"Was not Alfred de Musset of the same type?"

"Undoubtedly. The type was common to the epoch. Byron set the example, and it was the fashion for men of genius to court untimely death. Musset, the greatest poet France has ever had, son of the morning, elegant, aristocratic

born to love and to be loved, after a youth of surpassing brilliance, wasted the ripest years of manhood in the wine shops of the Quartier Latin, and was forgotten like a light blown out, long before the end of his life. Our geniuses of to-day know better how to husband their resources. They are as careful of their brain-power as an elderly spinster of her Sunday gown."

"How much better for them and for posterity," said Mrs. Champion. "Please go on, Rosa," as Mrs. Gresham made a show of rising from the piano, "Chopin is always delightful."

"So he is; but I have been playing Rubinstein," replied Rosa, severely.

"Then do play that sweet prelude of Chopin's in A flat major."

"Why, I played it ten minutes ago," answered the lady at the piano.

"How sweet of you. You know how I worship Chopin," answered Edith, unabashed, and immediately went on talking.

"I dare say it is only the effect of that horrible story," she said, "but I have been feeling absurdly morbid of late, and I can't help tormenting myself about your health."

"A most futile torment, since I am perfectly well," Gerard answered irritably.

"No doubt, no doubt; but my husband seemed perfectly well last year, and yet there was all manner of organic mischief. I know you are not strong, and since you came into your fortune you have been looking dreadfully ill."

"So my mother told me. Gold has evidently a bad effect upon the complexion, and yet the seventeenth century physicians considered it a fine tonic, boiled in broth."

"I want you to do me a favour, Gerard."

"Command my devotion in all things, great and small."

"Oh, it is not a great thing. You will come to Mont Oriol, of course?"

"Yes. If that is all you were going to ask——"

"It is something more than that. Before you leave London I want you to consult the cleverest physician you can find. The man who knows most about brain, and heart, and lungs."

"A wide field for scientific exploration. I suppose you really mean the man who has con-

trived to make himself the fashion—the man to whom it is the right thing to go."

"No, no. I am not the slave of fashion. Go to some one who will understand you—who will be able to advise you how to enjoy your life, without wasting it as Balzac and Musset did."

"Have no fear. I am no Balzac or Musset. I have no Byronic fire consuming me; and be assured I mean to husband my life—for the sake of the years to come—which should be very happy."

He took up the hand lying loose in her lap, the beautiful, carefully cherished hand which the winds of heaven never visited too roughly, and bent down to kiss it, just as the Moonlight Sonata came to a close.

"Oh, do go on, Rosa. Some more Mendelssohn, please."

With perhaps the faintest touch of malice Mrs. Gresham attacked the Wedding March, with a crash that made the lamp glasses shiver.

"Do you know of any clever physician?" asked Edith.

"I have never needed a physician since I was eleven years old, and the only famous doctor I

know is the man who saved my life then, Dr. South, the children's doctor. I have half a mind to go to him."

"A child's doctor," said Edith, shrugging her shoulders.

"Children have hearts, and brains, and lungs. I dare say Dr. South knows something about those organs, even in adults."

"You will go to him to-morrow morning, then —and if he is not satisfied he will advise another opinion. I should have preferred the new German doctor, whom everybody is consulting, and who does such wonders with hypnotism—Dr. Geistrauber. They say he is a most wonderful man."

"'They' are an authority not always to be relied upon. I would rather go to Dr. South, who saved my life when I was in knickerbockers."

"Were you so very ill then?" asked Mrs. Champion, tenderly interested even in a crisis of seventeen years ago.

"Yes; I believe I was as bad as a little lad can be, and yet live. When I try to remember my illness it seems only a troubled dream, through which Dr. South's kindly face looms

large and distinct. My complaint was inflammation of the lungs, a malady which Dr. South said most children take rather kindly; but in my case there were complications. I was like Mrs. Gummidge, and the disease was worse for me than for other children. I was as near death's door as any one can go without crossing the threshold; and my people believe to this day that but for Dr. South I should have entered at that fatal door. It was a pull for a man of my father's means to bring down the famous children's doctor, but the dear old dad never regretted the heavy fee; and here I am to tell the story, of which I knew very little at the time, for I was off my head all through the worst of my illness, and I believe there was one stage of delirium during which I associated Dr. South's fine grey head—prematurely grey—with a great white elephant of Siam of which I had been reading in 'Peter Parley's Annual.'"

"Poor dear little fellow!" sighed Edith Champion, with retrospective affection.

"How sweet of you to pity me! I find myself pitying my own small image in that dim and troubled time, as if it were anybody's child. The

complications were dreadful—pleurisy, pneumonia; I believe the local doctor found a new name for my complaint nearly every day, till Dr. South gave his decisive verdict, and then pulled me through by his heroic treatment. Yes, I will go to him to-morrow; not because I want medical advice, but because I should like to see my old friend again."

"Go to him; pray go to him," urged Edith, "and tell him everything about yourself."

"My dear Edith, I have no medical confession to make. I am not ill."

Mrs. Gresham had played herself out, for the time being, and came into the front drawing-room as the footman appeared with tea *à la Française*—tea that knits up the ragged sleeve of care, tired Nature's nurse, for Duchesses as well as for washerwomen.

The talk became general, or became, rather, a lively monologue on the part of Rosa Gresham, who loved her own interpretation of Chopin or Charvenka, but loved the sound of her own voice better than any music that ever was composed.

Mr. Champion reappeared a few minutes after

eleven, looking tired and white after an hour and a half at the whist club, and Hillersdon went out as his host came in—went out, but not home. He walked eastward, and looked in at two late clubs, chiefly impelled by his desire to meet Justin Jermyn, but there was no sign of the Fate-reader either at the Petunia or the Small-Hours, and no one whom Hillersdon questioned about him had seen him since Lady Fridoline's party.

"He has gone to some Bad in Bohemia," said Larose; "a Bad with a crackjaw name. I believe he invents a name and a Bad every summer, and then goes quietly and lives up the country between Broadstairs and Birchington, and basks all day upon some solitary stretch of sand, or on the edge of some lonely cliff, where the North Sea breezes blow above the rippling ripeness of the wheat; and lies in the sunshine, and plans fresh impostures for the winter season. No one will see him or hear of him any more till November, and then he will come back and tell us what a marvellous place Rumpelstiltzkinbad is for shattered nerves; and he will describe the scenery, and the hotel, and the hot springs, and

the people—ay, almost as picturesquely as I could myself," concluded Larose, with his low, unctuous chuckle, which was quite different from Jermyn's elfin laughter, and as characteristic of the man himself.

Hillersdon stayed late at the Small Hours, and drank just a little more dry champagne than his mother or Mrs. Champion would have approved, women having narrow notions about the men they love, notions which seem hardly ever to pass the restrictions of the nursery. He did not drink because he liked the wine, nor even for joviality's sake; but from a desire to get away from himself and from a sense of irritation which had been caused by Mrs. Champion's suggestions of ill-health.

"I shall be hypnotised into an invalid if people persist in telling me I am ill," he said to himself, dwelling needlessly upon Edith Champion's anxieties.

The market carts were lumbering into Covent Garden when he went home, and as the natural result of a late night, and an unusual amount of champagne, he slept ill and woke with a headache. He breakfasted upon a devilled biscuit and a cup

of green tea, and was in Harley Street before eleven o'clock.

Having made no appointment, Mr. Hillersdon had to undergo the purgatory of the waiting-room, where an anxious and somewhat dowdy mother was trying to beguile the impatience of a rickety son with picture books, and, in her gentle solicitude, offering a curious contrast to a much smarter mother, whose thoughts seemed to be rather with an absent dressmaker than with her sickly, overgrown girl, to whom she spoke occasionally in accents of reproof, or in lachrymose complaint at having to wait so long for Dr. South, while Madame Viola was no doubt waiting for her—"and when I do get to Bruton Street very likely she won't see me," lamented the lady, in an undertone. "It's all your fault, Clara, for catching cold. You are so idiotic about yourself. I dare say you will be ordered off to some expensive place in Switzerland. Doctors have no consideration for one."

The girl's only reply to this maternal wailing was a little hacking cough, which recurred as often as a comma. Her wan face and rather shabby frock contrasted with the mother's artistic

bloom and perfect tailor gown. Hillersdon felt a sense of relief when the man in black looked in at the door, and summoned mother and daughter with a mysterious nod, which seemed pregnant with mournful augury, although it meant nothing but "your turn."

The anxious lady impressed him so much more pleasantly that, as time hung heavy, he made friends with the boy, helped to entertain him by presenting the illustrations of a zoological book in a new light for the next quarter of an hour; and then the rickety boy and his mother were summoned, and more patients came in, and Hillersdon tried to lose his consciousness of the passing moments in the pages of a stale *Saturday Review*,—moments too distinctly measured by the ticking of a very fine Sherraton clock, which stood sentinel in a niche by the sideboard.

The man in black came for him at last, as it were the fatal ferryman ready for a new passenger, and he was ushered into the presence of Dr. South, whom he found in a spacious room at the back of the house, lighted by a large window, which commanded a metropolitan garden, shut in by ivy-covered walls.

The grey hair and genial smile brought back a vision of a little bed near a sunny window, and summer breezes blowing over a head that seemed to scorch the pillow where it lay.

He recalled the childish illness and the Devonian Rectory to Dr. South, who remembered his journey by the night mail, and his arrival at daybreak in the stillness of a summer Sabbath morning—no labourer going out to the fields, only the song of the lark high up in the infinite blue above the ripening wheat. Dr. South had not forgotten that long summer day, in which, like many another medical Alcides, he had fought with death, wrestled with and thrown the grisly shade, and had gone back to his hospital, and his London patients, leaving hope and comfort behind him.

"I know I was very much interested in the case," he said. "Your mother was such a sweet woman. She has been spared to you, I hope."

"Yes, thank God, she is in excellent health—a young woman still in mind and habits."

And then he told Dr. South how, being just a little uneasy about his own constitution—though with no consciousness of any evil—he

had come to be overhauled by the physician whose skill he knew by experience.

"Please consider me a little lad again," he said lightly, "and knock my chest about as you did when I was lying in a troubled dream, making nonsense-pictures of all my surroundings."

"We shall not find much amiss, I hope," replied the doctor, with his kindly smile. "Take off your coat and waistcoat, if you please."

The auscultation was careful and prolonged. There was none of that pleasantly perfunctory air with which the physician dismisses a good case. Dr. South seemed bent upon exploring every square inch of that well set-up frame, from shoulders to waist, with bent head and stethoscope at his ears. He concluded his examination with a faint sigh, which might mean only fatigue.

"Do you find anything amiss?" asked the patient, rather anxiously.

"I cannot detect absolute organic mischief, but there is a certain amount of weakness in both heart and lungs. You have had some painful shock very lately, have you not? Your nerves have been greatly shaken."

"I have had a great surprise, but it was pleasant rather than painful."

"I rejoice to hear it, but the fact that a pleasant surprise should have so unhinged you is in itself a warning."

"How so?"

"It denotes highly strung nerves and a certain want of stamina. To be frank with you, Mr. Hillersdon, yours is not what we call a good life; but many men of your constitution live to old age. It is a question of husbanding your resources. With care, and a studious avoidance of all excesses, moral or physical, you may live long."

Gerard thought of the *peau de chagrin.* A studious avoidance of excess—in other words, a constant watch upon that red line upon the sheet of white paper which showed the shrinking of the talisman. Little by little, with every hour of agitated existence, with every passionate heart-throb, and every eager wish, the sum total of his days would dwindle.

"I have just come into a large fortune, and am only beginning to live," he said fretfully. "It is hard to be told at this juncture that I have not a good life."

"I cannot prophesy smooth things, Mr. Hillersdon. You come to me for the truth?"

"Yes, yes, I know; and I am grateful to you for your candour; but still it is hard lines, you must allow."

"It would be harder if you were a struggling professional man, and saw your career blighted at the outset. I am very glad to hear of your good fortune. With the resources and expedients of modern science—which are all at the command of wealth—you ought to live to be eighty."

"Yes, but at the price of an unemotional life. I am to vegetate, not to live!"

He slipped the neatly papered guineas into the doctor's hand, and then turning on the threshold he asked nervously—

"Do you forbid me to marry, lest I should become the father of a consumptive progeny?"

"By no means. I find no organic mischief, as I told you. I would strongly advise you to marry. In a happy domestic life you would find the best possible environment for a man of your somewhat fragile physique and highly nervous temperament."

"Thanks; that is encouraging, at any rate. Good day."

After leaving the doctor Hillersdon strolled across Portland Place and into the Portland Road, where he made an exploration of the second-hand furniture shops, in search of certain objects which were to assist in realising his idea as to those two rooms in his Italian villa which he had taken upon himself to furnish.

As hour's peregrination from shop to shop resulted only in the purchase of one piece of furniture, a black oak cabinet, ostensibly of the sixteenth century, possibly a clever piece of patchwork put together last year. It satisfied Gerard Hillersdon because it closely resembled another black oak cabinet which he had seen lately.

He had taken it into his head to reproduce for his own private den those two rooms in which he had sat at supper with Justin Jermyn, and where he had seen the vision of Hester Davenport; rooms which perhaps had no tangible existence, dream-rooms, the shadow-pictures of a hypnotic trance. It pleased him to think that he could reproduce in solid oak and brass, in old

Venetian glass and quaint Dutch pottery, the scene which might have been made up of shadows, since his failure to discover the house or the locality of the house where he had supped with Jermyn had given a tinge of unreality to all his memories of that eventful night.

CHAPTER IX.

"I BUILT MY SOUL A LORDLY PLEASURE-HOUSE."

For those who were not bound by their doctors to some constraining regimen of bathing and self-denial, life at Mont Oriol was one perpetual holiday. Such visitors as Edith Champion lived only to amuse themselves—to drive to distant ruins—ride in the early morning when the sun-baked grass was cooled with dew, play cards or billiards, and dance in the evening. For Mr. Champion Mont Oriol meant daily baths, a severe regimen as to meat and drink, and a strict avoidance of all business transactions, such transactions being the very delight of his life, the salt which gave life its savour, and without which the man felt himself already dead.

"There are men who are dead from the waist downwards," he said one day, "and who have to

be dragged about in bath chairs, or lifted in and out of a carriage. I don't pity them, as long as they are allowed to write their own business letters. I am dead from the waist upwards."

He had his secretary with him at Mont Oriol, and in spite of all prohibitions, that falcon eye of his was never off the changes of the money market. He had telegrams from the Stock Exchange daily, in his own particular cypher, which was at once secret and economical. There were days when tens of thousands trembled in the balance, while he sat taking his sun-bath on the terrace in front of the hotel, and when the going down of the sun interested him only because it was to bring him tidings of loss or gain.

"Would you like a set of opals, Edith?" he asked, one day at afternoon tea, crumpling up the little bit of blue paper which had just been brought to him. "I have made some money by a rise in Patagonian Street Railways."

"A thousand thanks, but you forget the opals you gave me two years ago. I don't think you could improve upon those."

"Yes, I had forgotten them. They belonged to a Russian Princess. I got them for about half

their value. Then I suppose there is nothing I can give you?" he asked, with a faint sigh, as if her indifference had suggested the impotence of riches.

"You are too good. I think not. I have everything in the world I care for."

Mr. Champion and his wife had the handsomest suite of rooms in the hotel, and Gerard had taken the next best. Between them they absorbed an entire floor in one wing of the great white barrack. They were thus in a manner secluded from the vulgar herd, and Gerard seemed as if staying on a visit with the Champions, since he was invited to use their salon as freely as his own, while he dined with them five days out of seven. He had his own servants with him, valet and groom, and he began to think that he too wanted a secretary, if it were only to write every day to architect or builder, urging them to expedite their work. He was eager to be installed in his own house—eager to accumulate pictures and statuary, curios, books, plate—to taste the feverish rapture of spending his money. If, as Dr. South had hinted, his life was likely to be shorter than the average life, there was all the more reason why he should

spend his money freely, why he should crowd into a few years all the enjoyment that wealth can buy. Yet even here there was peril. He had been warned against all fierce emotions. To prolong that feeble life of his he must live temperately, and never pass the limits of tranquil domestic life.

It seemed to him that with this view he could hardly have done better for himself than in that compact which he had made with Edith Champion. In his relations with her there was no fiery agitations, no passionate impatience. He loved her, and had loved her long—perhaps a little more passionately when his love was a new thing, but not, he assured himself, more devotedly than he loved her now. He was secure of her love, secure also of her virtue, for had she not known how to maintain her self-respect during this long apprenticeship to platonic affection? Their lives would glide smoothly on, till James Champion, cared for and kindly treated to the last hour of his existence, should drop gently into the grave, decently mourned for such space of time and in such manner as the world exacts of well-bred widows. And then Edith and he would be

married, and would assume that commanding position in London and continental society which only a husband and wife whose views and culture exactly harmonise can ever attain. The prospect was in every way agreeable, and he could look forward to it without any quickened throbbing of his tired heart. Dr. South had called it a tired heart—a heart with which there was nothing organically wrong, only the languor left by the strain of over-work. He could sit in the hotel garden taking his sun-bath, and placidly admiring the perfection of Edith's profile, shadowed by the broad-leaved Leghorn hat, or the delicate arch of her instep in the high-heeled Parisian shoe, so eminently adapted for sitting still.

And thus the days went by at Mont Oriol, and nothing broke the monotony of luxurious idleness —a life such as Guinevere and her knights and ladies may have led at Camelot, when things were beginning to go rather badly at the Court of King Arthur, a life of sensuous pleasures and dormant intellectuality—a life in which people talked about books, but rarely read, affected a profound interest in advanced philanthropy, yet would have hardly risen from an easy-chair to

save a fellow-man from ruin, a life in which heart and brain were only half awake, while the desire of the eye and the delight of the ear were paramount.

Pleasant as this holiday time was, Gerard rejoiced when it came to an end and he was free to return to London and look after his architect and builder. October was half gone when he arrived in his old shabby quarters near the church, at which his new valet—*vice* Dodd, superannuated—looked with contempt. The builders were hard at work in the house near the Park—Stamford House it had been called, but it was to be known henceforward by the name of its new owner. The builders were working by night as well as by day, by the aid of the electric light which was already installed. Gerard went to see them at work on the night after his return, and to his fancy there seemed something demoniac in the vision of these men swarming up and down ladders and balancing themselves upon narrow cornices in the cold clear light, and amidst the noise of many hammers.

They were a little behind with their work, the clerk of the works admitted, but there had been

a difficulty in getting good men, and he was determined only to have first-rate workmen upon a job of such importance."

"Depend upon it, you'll be satisfied with the result, sir," he said. "The alteration of the façade has been a very difficult job, I can assure you. It isn't like beginning fair, you see. We have had to adapt the loggia to the existing front, and to avoid all appearance of patchwork. You'll be pleased when it's done."

"Perhaps I shall, if I live long enough to see it," answered Gerard, fretfully. "But judging by the present aspect of the house, I may be in my grave before it is finished."

"Oh, indeed, sir, we are more forward than you may think. The interior decorations are going on simultaneously. Things will come together in a day. The architect is thoroughly satisfied with the way the work is being done."

"No doubt; but the architect is not waiting to occupy the house, as I am."

He stayed there for nearly two hours betwixt midnight and morning, going about with the clerk of the works amidst all the litter and confusion of painters and carpenters, glaziers and

plumbers, a veritable pandemonium, in which fiends were passing to and fro with cauldrons of boiling lead, and pots of acrid-smelling paint, a scene of discordant noises, shrill whistling from divers whistlers, sounds of plane and hammer, chisel, and augur. It was out of this chaos his ideal mansion was to come, fresh as the world when the Creator saw that it was well.

He went there again next day with Mrs. Champion and her niece. She had at least a dozen nieces, and took up one or another as capriciously as she chose her gloves. Roger Larose and the furniture-man were there to meet them, and they all went over the house by daylight, peering into every corner, and discussing every detail, the mantelpieces, the stoves, the windows and window-seats, moulding, panelling, painting, carving, glass stained, and glass Venetian, Bohemian, Belgian.

Aunt and niece were both agreed that house and decorations would be quite too lovely. They did not attempt any more technical opinion. The niece, Miss Flora Bellinger, went about with her petticoats held up and her shoulders and elbows contracted, murmuring, "Lovely, lovely," to

everything, even the sink in the housemaid's pantry, and in deadly fear of wet paint.

One suggestion Mrs. Champion ventured to make:

"Be sure you have plenty of corners," she said to Mr. Larose; "quaint, odd angles, don't you know—pretty little nooks that can be made Moorish, or Japanese, or Dutch, or Old English, just as one's fancy may suggest."

"My dear lady, you see the rooms," replied the architect gravely, "and you see the angles. I cannot alter the shape of rooms that are practically finished."

"That's a pity. I thought you could have thrown in corners. The rooms are utterly lovely —but there are no cosy nooks."

"I see, Mrs. Champion, that you hanker after a Flemish style, which has now become the property of the restaurants. Were you ever in the Ricardi Palace at Florence?"

"Yes, I know it well."

"I don't think you saw any quaint nooks or odd angles there, although you may find as many as you like in Earl's Court."

"Yes, I suppose they are getting common,"

sighed Mrs. Champion; "everything becomes common—everything pretty and fantastical, at least."

After that searching inspection, which involved certain small emendations and final decisions, Gerard Hillersdon told himself that he would look no more upon his house until it was finished, except those two rooms which he was to furnish after his own devices. It would worry him too much to go there day after day only to see how slowly the British workman can work. Mrs. Champion and her husband were to spend November and December at Brighton, so Gerard went down to the Rectory, where mother and sister were full of delight when he told them that he had come to stay for at least a month.

He found his family rejoicing over the good fortune of Mr. Cumberland, who had been promoted from a rural curacy to a London living. The stipend was modest, but the parish was extensive, and included one of the poorest districts in the great city—a labyrinth of narrow streets and alleys lying between the churches of St. Anne and St. Giles. It was in just such a parish as this that John Cumberland desired to

labour. He was at heart a Socialist. He believed in the stringent rights of the poor and the responsibilities of the rich, and saw in the increasing luxury and costliness which marked the existence of the upper classes the sign of a degenerate people and a profligate age. In his new parish of St. Lawrence, Wardour Street, there were all those elements of life which most deeply interested him. It was a parish of mixed classes and divers nationalities, the chosen haunt of the impecunious exile, the Nihilist and the Fenian, the Carbonaro and the Karl Marxian. It was a parish peopled by the intelligent British workman, the self-educated and self-sufficient mechanic. Great blocks of buildings, erected at different periods, and showing different stages of architectural and sanitary improvement, cast their mighty shadows over the lower level of slates and tiles that roofed the courts and alleys of the past. These huge edifices were model lodging-houses, more or less admirable in their arrangements, and at their worst a considerable advance upon the hovels that surrounded them.

Here, too, in the parish of St. Lawrence the Martyr, was the well-known club for women who

earned their bread by the sweat of their brow—needlewomen of all kinds, factory girls of divers industries, from jam and pickle making in Soho to filling cartridges in the Gray's Inn Road—a club which was the centre of civilisation, improvement, and all refining influences, for hundreds of hard-working girls and women, and which had flourished exceedingly under the fostering care of Lady Jane Blenheim, a woman who devoted her life to good works. John Cumberland was delighted at the prospect of having Lady Jane for his counsellor and ally; nor was he in any way disheartened by the knowledge that he and his young wife were to begin their wedded life in a district which smart people would call "impossible." The Vicarage of St. Lawrence was a substantially built early Georgian house, in Greek Street, a street which was occupied by the very cream of modish society in the days of Chesterfield and Bolingbroke, but which is now chiefly distinguished by French laundries and restaurants, Italian grocery, and foreign conspirators of various types and nationalities.

The living was worth something under five hundred a year, but the Rector of Helmsleigh

knew by experience how much of a clergyman's income has to be sacrificed to the claims of his parish, and how little may be left for his own maintenance. He had, therefore, questioned the wisdom of allowing his daughter to marry a man whose only independent means consisted of a legacy of railway shares from a spinster aunt, which shares produced about a hundred and twenty pounds a year. He was also averse from the idea of Lilian's lines being set in the smoky atmosphere of Soho.

"Let Jack Cumberland dree his weird under the shadow of Cross and Blackwell, and take his fill of work in a poor parish for the next two or three years," said the Rector, with his genial air, cheerily disposing of other people's lives. "By that time he will have made himself a reputation as a powerful preacher, and something better will turn up—a fat living in a nice part of the country, where my pet can have her garden and glebe meadows."

"Indeed, father, I don't want a garden, and a sleepy, idle life, such as—as the very best people are content to lead in the country," answered Lilian, eagerly. "I would much rather work

hard with Jack in a poor parish like St. Lawrence."

"Ah, that is the way with young people," sighed the Rector, whose favourite maxim for the last twenty years had been that of Parson Dale, *Quieta non movere*, "they are always wanting to go out and fight dragons. If they are not rampant for pleasure, tennis, dances, hunting, why then they are rampant for work. The girls want to be hospital nurses, the boys want to be East-end curates, or to go to Africa, or, at the first whisper of some purposeless unnecessary war, they rush off to enlist. Young people have no idea how good it is to take life quietly, and make the most of one's allotted span."

The young people in this instance were so resolute, and their elders so yielding, that it was finally agreed that Lilian and Jack should be married a year after he had read himself in at the church of St. Lawrence. A year would give him time to settle down in his parish, to put a good many crooked things straight, and get into a groove in which his life and Lilian's might move quietly along, without over much

worry or emotion. He would have time to furnish those gloomy old panelled rooms which to Lilian's eyes were beautiful, fraught with delightful memories of patch and powder, lovely ladies in rustling brocade sacques, daintily emerging from their sedan chairs to trip lightly up the stone steps, while their running footmen quenched their torches under the iron extinguishers. The panelled walls, the iron extinguishers were left, but who now has a running footman? Duchess Georgina had six, six splendid over-fed creatures in plush and bullion, silk stockinged, powdered, beautiful, six to run in the mud beside her chair, and hover about her and protect her when she alighted. Lilian was charmed at the thought of the old-fashioned London house, and the rapture of picking up quaint old cabinets and secretaires, and tables with claw and ball feet, to furnish withal. She was in no wise depressed by the notion of a year's engagement. This time of courtship was such a happy time—a season of tenderest chivalry, and pretty trivial gifts, and small innocent pleasures which needed much planning beforehand, season of letters perpetual

and unending, letters about nothing, yet so delightful to the recipient, letters written at midnight, letters pencilled hastily in the early morning—nay, one letter written in the vestry, which seemed a kind of sacrilege, but was not less esteemed on that account.

"There are hours in which you are my religion, and I almost forget that I have any other," said Jack, when his sweetheart reproached him for that vestry letter.

Mr. Cumberland was still doing duty as curate at Helmsleigh when Gerard came on the scene. He was to assume his new duties shortly after Christmas.

"Then Lilian can come and keep house for me," said Gerard, "and then she will be able to see her lover every day, and I can help in the furnishing."

"Oh, please don't," cried his sister. "You would spoil all our fun. You have too much money. You would just say to an upholsterer, 'furnish,' and he would come with his men and take possession of—our house," with a shy smile, and a blushing glance at her lover, "and everything would be done splendidly, expensively, and

as the upholsterer liked, not as we like. No, dear Gerard, we are going to pick up our furniture bit by bit, and it is to be all as old as that wicked old George who shut up his poor wife in the Castle at Alden. We have begun already. We bought a walnut-wood bureau with brass handles, in Exeter, the other day—so old—oh, so old—and all genuine."

"Except the handles," said Cumberland, laughing; "I shouldn't like to answer for the handles. They look very like having been put on last week."

"They have been newly lacquered, sir. You are dreadfully ignorant. The dear old drawers and pigeon holes and secret recesses smell of old papers—lost wills—marriage certificates upon which great fortunes depend—love letters—sermons preached a hundred and fifty years ago. That bureau is a romance in walnut-wood, and if you could see the dirty old shop in which we found it——"

"I am answered," said Gerard; "the wealth of the Indies cannot give you half the pleasure you will find in bargain-hunting in dirty shops. Perhaps when you have found that most of your

treasures are spurious, and that you could have got better and truer antiques for less money at a West End upholsterer's, your bargain hunting will lose some of its zest. I bide my time."

It amused him a little, and interested him deeply to see how small a significance his wealth had in the eyes of his sister, as compared with her lover and her own outlook of genteel poverty in a crowded London parish. For this girl, deep in love with an enthusiast, and sharing his enthusiasm, wealth had no fascination.

"You are too good," she told her brother, when they two were alone, and he pressed her to accept a handsome dowry, "but I shouldn't care to have money settled upon me, for fear Jack should feel humiliated. He cannot afford to settle anything; and I shouldn't like the settlement to be onesided."

"But, my dear girl, that is all nonsense."

"Perhaps it is, only please let me have my own way. We are sure to want your help by and by, to build schools, or to improve the church, perhaps. There is sure to be some pressing want in the parish, and then we will appeal to you. And in the meantime, as we are to live

among poor people, it is good for us to be poor. We shall be able to sympathise with them, and understand them all the better."

Gerard argued no longer, but he meant that his sister should be dowered by him, all the same. She should not be poor, while he was inordinately rich. The settlement would have to be made. In the meantime he was glad that the marriage was delayed a year, so that he might have this bright young creature for his companion in the new home whose splendour he thought of sometimes with a thrill of apprehension. Would he not feel lonely in that large house until he could bring a wife home, and all his wife's feminine surroundings of cousins and bosom friends, with their flutter, and fuss, and life, and movement. A house occupied only by men has always a gloomy atmosphere. There lacks the colour and frou-frou of women's brighter raiment.

He pleaded with his mother that she should spare Lilian to him, until she should be claimed by a husband, and the mother, who dearly loved this wayward son—her poet as she had called him in the fond exaggeration of maternal love,

intoxicated by his juvenile success in literature—could refuse him nothing. She would have to part with her only daughter in a little time. That was inevitable. The light-hearted daughter of the house, she whose heaviest task hitherto had been the making of a new frock for a smart garden-party, she whose only sorrows had been the sorrows of others, was now to go out into the thick of the fight, and bear her own burdens as wife and mother, and carry on her shoulders and in her heart the care of a man's life, his mistakes and disappointments, his failures and difficulties, all his frailties and feebleness, physical and mental. These were to be her burden, and these she must carry patiently to the end, or else go out into the dismal company of faithless, dishonoured wives. The Rector of Helmsleigh had been a good husband, as husbands go, yet his wife looked at her fair young daughter, sitting at the piano under the soft lamp-light, accompanying her lover's song, very much as Abraham may have looked at Isaac on the eve of the intended sacrifice.

"It will not be a parting for you and Lilian," pursued Gerard, intent upon his purpose, "for I

shall expect you to spend all the best part of the year at Hillersdon House. We will do the London season together. We will drink the cup of pleasure to the dregs."

"My dearest boy, what do I know of the season. I should be out of my element among the people you call smart. When Barbara Vere rattled on about her great parties, and her lords and ladies, I felt as if she was talking an unknown language. I can get on very well with our county people here—we are county ourselves, you know—but I dare say I should hardly feel comfortable with them if I met them in London, in all their London finery."

"Dear mother, you underrate the adaptability of your plastic sex. I can conceive my father feeling bored by town gaieties, and pining for his poultry yard, his county papers, and his infallible barometer. He has got into the rustic groove, and might suffer by transplantation—but you would enjoy the quick, eager existence, and intellectual friction."

"I certainly should delight in meeting intellectual people—Tennyson, Browning, Tyndall, and Owen for instance," said Mrs. Hillersdon, as if a

little group of that kind were to be met at every evening party in the season."

"And the music and the pictures," suggested Gerard.

"Yes, indeed, there is so much to see and to hear in London. When we have gone up to Limmer's for a fortnight the time has been all too short. A Greenwich dinner, which I shall always consider a sad waste of time and money, an afternoon at Richmond, perhaps a day at Ascot, and luncheon parties in London with too hospitable friends. The fortnight goes by in a rush, and one seems to have seen nothing."

"It shall be otherwise when you are with me, mother. We will go about in a leisurely way, and see everything. I know my little London, all that she is, and all that she is not, and I will teach you how to get the best she can give you. I wonder what you will think of my house."

"I am sure it will be perfect. You have such good taste."

"Fond flatterer. I have nothing but money, which can buy the educated taste of other people."

* * * *

Gerard spent Christmas at the Rectory, partly

because his mother was especially anxious that he should be with her at that season of family gatherings, and partly because his latest letters from builder, architect, and furniture man promised the completion of the house on the last day of the year. There had been a good deal of prevarication in former letters, and there had been various excuses for delay—excuses chiefly of a climatic nature, the elements seeming to have conspired against the completion of that particular house. Frost may have told Fog that the house belonged to a new man, and that the new man ought to wait. Could he not be content with the dog-kennel in which he had lived hitherto, forsooth?

But Roger's last letter was specific. The builder pledged himself that his men should clear out of the house on the morning of the 31st. Decorators, carpet-layers, needlewomen should vanish from the scene, silently as goblins at cockcrow, and on New Year's Eve men and women, builders' minions and upholsterers' minions, were to feast together on a grand supper at the "Bell and Horns," in the Brompton Road.

Edith Champion had undertaken what she

called the mounting of the establishment. She had secured an all-accomplished housekeeper, and a clever man cook, who did not accept the situation until assured of three underlings in the kitchen, a private sitting-room, and the use of a brougham for his marketing. She had chosen butlers and footmen, and had devised a livery for the latter—darkest green, with black velvet collar and facings, black velvet small clothes and black silk stockings. "It is a sombre livery," she wrote; "but the powder relieves it, and I think you will like the effect. Your men will wear silk stockings always, that is a point, and I have told your housekeeper to be very particular about their shoe-buckles. Their shoes will be made in Bond Street, and will cost thirty shillings a pair. Forgive me for troubling you with these details; but with your wealth your only chance of distinction is by nicety in minor points. Your house will be simply perfect. I went through the reception-rooms yesterday. The ceilings are painted in the style of the Ricardi Palace—a banquet in Olympus. Cobalt predominates in the drapery of the goddesses, who, although Rubensesque, are quite unobjec-

tionable. The effect is brilliant, and harmonises admirably with the subdued amber and russet of the brocade hangings and chair covers. I long for you to see your house now all is coming together. I engaged your Major Domo yesterday —a chance such as rarely falls in the way of a *nouveau riche.* He was fifteen years with Lord Hamperdonne, to whom he was guide, philosopher, and friend, rather than servant. It was he who rescued Hamperdonne from that odious engagement with Dolores Drumio, the Spanish dancer. He has a genius for organising every kind of entertainment; and if he and your *chef* can only work harmoniously your establishment will go on velvet. You will see that I am not engaging many servants. Parton will be house steward, groom of the chambers, and butler, with an under-butler and two footmen, a lad for cellar work, and a house messenger, so that your stablemen may never be called away from their work. For a bachelor, I think this personnel, with half a dozen women, quite sufficient. Anything further would mean display, rather than usefulness, and I'm sure you don't desire that."

"How wise she is," thought Gerard, as he read

this letter for the second time. "How delightful to have to deal with an accomplished woman of the world instead of a sentimental girl; and what a wife she will make for a man in my position, by and by, when poor Champion's time has come. Beautiful, well-born, and full of tact and social knowledge. Could any man desire a more delightful companion?" Of her husband, Mrs. Champion wrote in a melancholy strain. Mont Oriol had done him very little good. He had allowed his work and his worries to follow him to the valleys of Auvergne. He had not taken that absolute rest which the doctors had so strenuously urged, and he was considerably worse than he had been in the summer. The specialist who had seen him then now talked of "stock exchange spine," which Edith feared was some kind of mental ailment. Her husband was depressed and restless, and there was an idea of sending him to St. Leonards till the end of the winter with a trained attendant, as well as his valet.

"If he goes, I shall go with him," Mrs. Champion concluded, with the air of a Roman wife. "I must not allow pleasure or inclination

to interfere with my duty to him. I should have infinitely preferred any part of the Riviera—even Mentone—to St. Leonards, which I detest; but it will be some advantage to be near you, as I dare say you will be too much taken up with your new house to go to the South this year. By the way, have you any idea of the other House? A seat in Parliament would give you *kudos*, and our party wants all the strength it can get."

"*Pas si bête*," thought Gerard. "I am not going to waste any portion of my scanty life in an ill-ventilated, malodorous, over-crowded bear-garden!"

He was to go to London on New Year's Day, his sister accompanying him, delighted at the idea of the journey, and all the more delighted since John Cumberland had made it convenient to travel on the same day, and by the same train. He preached his farewell sermon on St. Stephen's Day, and drew tears from many of his hearers by the pathos of his farewell. His congregation knew that the pathos was real, and that he had really loved them, and worked for them as only love can work. Gerard had been glad to spend Christmas at home, for his mother's sake; but

despite his affection for both parents, and his tender regard for the associations of childhood and early youth, the small domestic pleasures, and twaddling recurrences to past years, the fuss about the home-grown turkey and the home-cured ham—ham cut from a pig of which the Rector talked as of a departed friend—the church decorations, the parochial festivities, the mothers' meetings, coal and blanket distributions, and exhibition of Christmas cards bored him excessively. In the country life goes round like a wheel, and nothing but death or calamity can change the circle of infinitesimal events. In London there is always something new to be done or to be heard of—new fashions, new scandals, the unexpected in some form or other.

Gerard was consumed by the feverish impatience of the "child who has new robes and may not wear them." That last week at the Rectory seemed illimitable. He wanted to be on the strong tide of life—to feel the swift river carrying him along—and here he seemed to be sitting on a vast stretch of level sand, from which he but faintly saw the distant flood. Yet this was precisely the kind of existence he had been

advised to lead—a life of placid monotony, passionless, uneventful.

On his last night at the Rectory, and in one of his last talks with his mother, she asked him in a casual way if he had seen or heard anything more of Hester Davenport.

"No; I have not tried to find her. The attempt seemed too hopeless; and after all, the face I saw was more a dream than a reality; yet I know it was Miss Davenport's face."

"I don't understand, Gerard——"

"No, dearest," interrupted her son. "I must say to you as Hamlet said to his fellow-student, 'There are more things in heaven and earth than' you—or I—can quite account for. You must come to London, mother. London is full of revelations for any one who has been buried alive for half a lifetime in a rustic Rectory. You will hear of new sciences, new religions. You will find Buddha placed shoulder to shoulder with Christ. You will find people discrediting the four evangelists and pinning their faith upon 'materializations.' You will find the cultured classes despising Dickens and making light of Thackeray, in favour of the last smart young

man who has written a smart story of three or four pages in a smart magazine. The old order is always changing. London is for ever new, for ever young. You will feel twenty years younger there than you do here."

"Younger under a smoky sky, Gerard! Younger in a place where one must put on one's gloves before one can venture to pick a rose. Younger among crowds of rushing people and over-worked cab-horses, and sickly town babies, whose poor little faces make one miserable. I shall be glad to be with you, dear; but I love this sleepy old Rectory better than the finest house in Park Lane or Grosvenor Square."

Gerard did not try to combat these benighted notions. His own face was set Londonwards early next morning, and he and Lilian were installed in the new house before afternoon tea. They had explored every room, and were ready to receive Mr. Cumberland and Mrs. Champion at eight o'clock to a friendly New Year dinner—a snug *parti carré* at a round table in the breakfast-room, one side of which was all window, opening into a winter-garden, where a fountain played in a low marble basin, encircled with camellias and palms.

The shaded lamps gave a soft and tempered light. The colouring in this room was subdued and cool, pale bluish green for the most part, the walls the colour of a hedge-sparrow's egg, relieved by the warm sepia and Indian red of a few choice etchings. These, with a wonderful arrangement of peacock's feathers and celadon Sèvres vases over the chimney-piece, were the only ornaments.

"No quaint corners or ingle-nook, nothing Moorish or Japanese in all the house; no copper or brass, or any one of the things I delight in," sighed Mrs. Champion. "Mr. Larose has been horridly tyrannical. Yet I must confess he has succeeded. Your house is a creation."

The service was perfection, every servant eager to please the new master, and the dinner was worthy of a company of gourmets, rather than of these four, who cared very little what they ate, and who were, some of them, too much absorbed in their own thoughts and feelings to know what they were eating. An oyster *soufflé* which would have evoked praises from Lucullus or Lord Alvanley, went round without comment or commendation. But if Mr. Hillersdon's friends did

not talk about the dinner there was plenty of talk about other things. Edith Champion was full of offers to take Lilian to her particular friends and her favourite tradespeople, during the few days she had left before going to St. Leonard's with her invalid husband.

"I want you to go to Madame St. Evremonde for your gowns," said Mrs. Champion. "She is the only woman in London who knows where a waist ought to begin and end—excuse my talking chiffons, Mr. Cumberland, we ought to keep that kind of thing for after dinner—but it is such a treat for a battered woman of the world like me to have a neophyte to instruct. I should like to take you to my shoemaker, too, for he is rather a difficult person to deal with; and if he don't take to you he won't even try to fit your foot."

"If that is the way of London shoemakers I should buy my boots ready-made at the Stores," said Cumberland, grimly.

"Are there ready-made shoes?" Mrs. Champion asked innocently. "How terrible. I know some people buy gloves in shops ready-made; but ready-made shoes must be too dreadful. They can't fit anybody."

"Their particular merit is that they fit everybody," said Cumberland. "It is only a question of size."

"Oh, if people don't care about shape or style, or whether they have an instep or not, I suppose a ready-made boot or shoe would do," said Mrs. Champion, taking a philosophical tone. "They would keep out the wet. Only if one is to take a proper pride in one's clothes one must have them from the best makers. I could be content to go through life in a tweed gown; but it must be made by Redfern or Felix."

"I'm afraid your dressmaker would be a great deal too smart and too expensive for me, Mrs. Champion," Lilian answered quietly.

"Too smart, too expensive—for Mr. Hillersdon's sister. Why, you will be expected to dress as well as the Princess of Wales. Your toilette will be under the fierce light that beats upon a millionaire. You will have to dress up to this house."

"I should be sorry to dress in a way that would be unsuited to a country clergyman's daughter."

"Or to a London clergyman's promised wife," said John Cumberland, stealing a tender look

at the fair young face from under his strongly-marked brows. Those brief looks meant a world of love to Lilian.

"Let her dress as plainly or as smartly as she pleases, Mrs. Champion," said Gerard, gaily; "but if Madame St. Evremonde is the best dressmaker in London to Madame St. Evremonde she must go. While you are in this house, Lilian, you must look your prettiest for my sake; but when you migrate to Greek Street you may wear a Quakeress's poke bonnet, or a Sister of Charity's hood."

"Greek Street," exclaimed Mrs. Champion, in her most childish manner. "Where is Greek Street?"

CHAPTER X.

"STILL ONE MUST LEAD SOME LIFE BEYOND."

THE dull beginning of the year, before the opening of Parliament and the gradual awakening of London, passed like a dream. The delight of installation in the home that he had created for himself, and the novel sensation of squandering money were enough to keep Gerard Hillersdon occupied and happy; while Lilian was divided between two absorbing duties. On the one side she had her brother, whom she dearly loved, and all the pomps and vanities of this wicked world; and on the other side she had her future husband, now fully established as Vicar of St. Lawrence's, and wanting her counsel and co-operation in every undertaking. "I want the parish to be as much your parish as mine,

Lilian," he said. "I want your mind and your hand to be in all things, great and small."

So on one day Lilian was trudging up and down some of the dirtiest alleys in West Central London, deliberating and advising as to a Night Refuge for women and children, and on the next she was with her brother at Christie's, giving her opinion about a Reynolds or a Raffaelle.

Gerard was profuse in his offers of money, would, indeed, from his own purse have supplied all the needs of St. Lawrence's; but Jack Cumberland exercised a restraining influence, and would only accept moderate benefactions—a hundred pounds for the new Refuge, a hundred for the Working Man's Institute, and fifty each for the Magdalen Rescue Society and Dispensary, two hundred for the schools; five hundred pounds in all.

"It seems absurd that you should want money for anything while I have ever so much more than I want," remonstrated Gerard, toying with his open cheque-book.

"You shall do something more for us a year or two hence, when you have familiarised yourself with your fortune, and have acquired a

sense of proportion," said Cumberland, smiling at his eagerness. "At present you are like a child with a new box of toys, who thinks that he can distribute them among his playfellows and yet have the boxful for himself. When you better know what money means you shall be our benefactor on a larger scale—always supposing you are still in the humour. In the meantime that five hundred pounds is a prodigious God-send, and will help us along capitally. I never hoped for such an excellent start."

"I believe the fellow wants to keep his parish poor," Gerard said afterwards, in a confidential talk with his sister.

"He doesn't want to sponge upon your fortune, Gerard, and he is afraid of pauperising his people by doing too much."

"Pauperising? Ah, that's always the cry nowadays; but it would take as long a head as Henry Brougham's to find out where help ends and pauperisation begins. If the State were to feed the Board School children, yea, even with one substantial meal per diem, we are told that we should be teaching the parents

to look to State aid, and to squander their wages on drink. I dare say it might work that way in a good many cases; but if, on the other hand, we could succeed in rearing a healthy race the craving for drink might be lessened in the next generation."

Hillersdon House was a success. Society flocked to the millionaire as flies go to the honey-pot. The Northern farmer's advice to his son is one of the chief points in social ethics. We all like to go where money is. There is a fascination in wealth and the luxury it can buy that only a Socrates can resist, and even Socrates went to rich men's houses, and smartened his rough attire for the feast. Society, which had always approved of Gerard Hillersdon, was on tiptoe to know what he would do with his money; that portion which envied him his wealth opining that he would run through this vast fortune in a year or two, while everybody had his own theory as to how he ought to spend it.

As a social adviser there could be no one better than Roger Larose, architect, poet, painter,

and man of fashion; a man who seemed to have founded his style and manners upon the long-forgotten bucks of those golden days before the Regency, when George, Prince of Wales, was young.

"I call Roger Larose the Sleeping Beauty," said Reuben Gambier, "for he looks as if he had fallen asleep in some corner of the Cocoa Tree Club, at the close of the eighteenth century, in a bag-wig, a puce coat, and a frilled shirt, and as if he had never become reconciled to modern costume."

Larose was an amiable enthusiast, full of pleasant whimsicalities, and Gerard, who was naturally indolent, allowed him full scope as a counsellor.

"You must give parties," said Larose; "it is useless having a fine house if you bury yourself alive in it! You had better have built yourself a mausoleum—not half a bad idea, by the by. If any dear old gentleman ever leaves me a few millions, I will build myself a pyramid, like Cheops, and live in it till I am ready for the embalmers—a pyramid in which I will receive only a few chosen friends—a

pyramid in which I will give choice little dinners to those chosen ones. Yes, my dear Gerard, you must give parties—breakfasts, luncheons, dinners, musical evenings. It is written in the stars that you are to provide a good many of the amusements of this ensuing season. I hope you like the notion of being a social centre, Miss Hillersdon?" said Roger, turning to Lilian, with an insinuating smile. Not a handsome man, by any means, this Larose, but with a delicate pallor, attenuated features, and a languid smile which women pronounced sympathetic.

"It is rather alarming, but I want Gerard to be happy and amused," Lilian replied brightly; "and Mr. Cumberland will help us to receive people. He was immensely popular in Devonshire."

"My dear young lady, Devonshire isn't London—but, of course, Mr. Cumberland is charming, and I hear people are going to St. Lawrence's to hear his sermons."

"People!" exclaimed Lilian; "why, the church is crammed every Sunday at all the services."

"Ah; but I mean people—people like Lord

Wordsworth, and Mr. Lemaitre, the actor; people like Lady Hyacinth Pulteney—people who criticise and talk. If that goes on, Mr. Cumberland will be an acquisition at your parties. But, my dear Gerard," pursued Roger solemnly, "the great point is food. People will go to you to be fed. Feed them. You will have a luxury of flowers, of course; Mrs. Smith —the Mrs. Smith—will decorate your rooms and dinner-table. People expect the lust of the eye to be gratified; but that is, after all, a minor point. Your iced asparagus, ortolans, quails, plovers' eggs—those are the essentials."

"And, as a reward for my hospitality, my house will be called the Restaurant Hillersdon, or Café Gerard. People will eat, drink, and be merry—all at my expense."

"No, my dear fellow. You will not be laughed at. You have not made your money out of Russian hides, or American manures. You do not come to us with inadequate aspirates, fresh from the Australian backwoods. You are not laboriously conning the alphabet of civilised life. You are one of us. You have graduated in all our follies and vices. You are an adept

in all our conventionalities—our mispronunciations, affectations, and jargon of all kinds. You will do. You are not a new man. You are only that nice boy, Gerard Hillersdon, plus two millions."

Hillersdon, perhaps, hardly needed this assurance. He might affect the misanthrope, and preach as bitterly as Timon in his cave. He loved his fellow-men just well enough to enjoy bringing them about him, and to feel that splendour would be a poor thing if there were nobody to admire it. Again, the science of entertaining was in itself full of interest. Every man who has mixed ever so little in society believes that he can give a dinner—assort his guests and revise a *menu*—better than any one else. Hillersdon was not without that delusion, and society fostered it by praise and appreciation. His luncheons, which were more frequent at Hillersdon House than any other form of entertainment, were voted perfect—perfect as to the choice of guests, the harmonious blending of divers opinions, professions, crazes—perfect as to all material elements—the *menu* never too elaborate or too long—the choicest luxuries

given with an air of simplicity which disguised their costliness. The popularity of his luncheons encouraged Mr. Hillersdon to revive a somewhat exploded form of hospitality. He began a series of Sunday breakfasts, to which only those were bidden whose wider and less orthodox views made the morning service of the Anglican Church a purely optional matter—to go or not to go, as the trained choir or the sensational preacher might invite;—unholy breakfasts, at which the literary agnostic or the disciple of the latest fad aired his or her opinions; breakfasts, the very thought of which made Lilian shudder, as she passed the breakfast-room door on her way to the victoria, which was to carry her to that little heaven below, where Jack Cumberland's choir of working-men, trained by himself, were to sing, and where Jack was to preach one of his heart-stirring sermons. She heard the voices and laughter of her brother's friends as she passed the breakfast-room door, and her heart sank within her at the thought of what small significance Sunday now had in the life of that brother. She loved him, and she began to fear that he had cast in his lot among the

unbelievers, among men who ridicule the idea of a Personal God, who can discover nowhere in this universe the necessity for any higher form of being than their own, who think that through illimitable cycles of years creation has been climbing upwards to its ultimate outcome, Man.

"Gerard, dear, is Sunday after Sunday to go by without your going to church?" Lilian asked, one sunny April morning, when she found her brother smoking a cigarette in the winter-garden, and looking idly at the Marechal Niel roses, while the servants in the adjoining room were putting their finishing touches to a breakfast-table laid for eight.

"My darling, I shouldn't be any the better for church, or the church any the better for me. I am a little out of harmony with the Christian idea, just now. Either I have outgrown it, or I am passing through a phase of doubt; but if you really want me to sacrifice to the respectabilities I will go to St. Lawrence with you next Sunday. One of Jack's rousing sermons will do me good. They are capital tonics for a relaxed brain!"

"Years ago you used to go to church every Sunday, and sometimes twice on a Sunday."

"Years ago I was very young, Lilian. I went to church for various reasons—first, to please my mother; and next, because the Rector would have made unpleasant remarks at luncheon if he had missed me from the family pew; next again, because I liked the sleepy old church and the sleepy service, and the familiar faces, and my father's short sensible sermon; and last of all, because I had not begun to think of how much or how little faith in spiritual things there was in me."

"And all that the cleverest people in London can teach you is not to believe," said Lilian, sadly.

"My dear girl, the clever people have very little to do with my disbelief. The change is in myself. It came about as spontaneously and mysteriously as cotton blight on an apple-tree. One day you see the tree flourishing, the leaves clean and full of sap; and the next day they are all curled up and withered, as if a fire had passed over them, and the incipient fruit is eaten of worms."

"The carriage is at the door, ma'am," announced one of those perfectly matched footmen whom Mrs. Champion had selected, magnificent, impassible beings, who looked and moved and spoke as if they had been cradled amidst patrician surroundings.

Lilian drove away in the sunshine, heavy at heart for the brother she loved. She saw him with the illimitable power of wealth, surrounded by all the snares and temptations of a world in which whim and pleasure are the only laws that govern mankind. She saw him cut adrift from the anchor in which she believed, sailing away from the safe harbour of the Christian faith, to the bleak and barren sea of scornful and sullen materialism; a gloomy agnosticism which looks with contempt upon every spiritual instinct, and laughs at every Heavenward aspiration as the delusion of children and fools.

While Lilian drove along Piccadilly, to the sound of various church bells, and past a population setting churchward, Mr. Hillersdon's Sunday visitors were slowly dropping in to the eleven o'clock breakfast—a meal which had but one drawback, according to Roger Larose. It made luncheon an impossibility.

One of the guests of the day, Mr. Reuben Gambier, was a youthful novelist, who had made all vice his province, and whose delight was to shock the susceptibilities of the circulating library. His books were naturally popular, and as in the case of a nervous rider with a restive horse, people were impressed more by the idea of what he might do than of what he had actually done. He was lively and eccentric, and a favourite with Hillersdon and his circle.

"I've brought a particular friend of mine, who tells me he knows you well enough to come without an invitation," said Gambier, entering the winter-garden unannounced, from the adjoining drawing-room into which he had been duly ushered. A low unctuous laugh sounded from the other side of the half-raised portière as he spoke, a laugh which Gerard instantly recognised.

"Your friend is Mr. Jermyn," he said quickly.

"Yes—how did you guess?"

"I heard him laugh; there is nobody else on earth who laughs like that."

"But you think there is some one down there who does," said Gambier, pointing significantly to the ground. "A strange laugh, ain't it?

but very cheery—sounds as if mankind were a stupendous joke, and as if Jermyn were in the secret of all the springs that work this little world, and knew when it was going to burst up. I believe he knows more about it all than Sir William Thomson, or any of those scientific swells who tell us what the sun is made of, and how long they can warrant the earth to last."

Jermyn's head appeared under the old brocade curtain—a curtain made from the vestments of Italian priests, the rich spoil of a mediæval sacristy—a curious face seen against the background of purple and gold, clear cut, brilliant in colouring, high narrow brow receding curiously, sharp nose, light grey eyes, and smiling mouth, displaying regular white teeth.

He paused for a moment or two, with the curtain in his hand, looking out of the purple and gold, then with a little gush of laughter, came across the marble floor and shook hands with his host.

"Surprised to see me, ain't you, Hillersdon?"

"No; I have only been surprised not to see you. And now answer me a question. Where the devil are those rooms of yours in which you

gave me supper on the night after Lady Fridoline's party?"

"What! Have you been hunting me up there?"

"Hunting! Yes, it was a decided case of hunting. I don't think the shrewdest detective in London could find those rooms of yours."

"I dare say not, unless he knew where to look for them. I never tell anybody my address, but I sometimes take a friend home to supper—a man who is too full of himself and his own affairs to observe the way by which he goes."

Another visitor came into the winter-garden, and then Hillersdon went into the next room to receive the rest of the party, which was soon complete.

The ninth guest proved a success. Most people were interested in the Fate-reader, although most people pretended to make very light of his art. That searching gaze of his, looking into a man's soul through his face, had an uncanny influence that fascinated as much as it repelled. He had made such strange hits by those fate-reading prophecies of his, and foretold changes and events in the lives of men, of which those

men had themselves no foreshadowing. What was this power which enabled him thus to prognosticate? He called it insight; but the word, though both vague and comprehensive, was not sufficient to explain a gift hitherto the peculiar property of the necromancer and the charlatan—never before exercised airily and gratuitously, by a man who was received in society. Whatever Mr. Jermyn's means might be, whether large or small, he had never been known to make money by the exercise of his occult power.

He was leaving with the rest of Hillersdon's friends before one o'clock, when his host detained him.

"I want to have a quiet talk with you," said Gerard, "we have not met since my altered fortunes."

"True," answered Jermyn, lightly, "but I prophesied the turn in your luck, did I not, old fellow?"

"You hinted at possibilities—you set me on the track of an old memory—that scene in the railway station at Nice."

"Lucky dog. Half the young men in London are green with envy when they talk about you.

An instant's peril—and a lifetime of boundless wealth."

"There is no such thing as boundless wealth except in America," said Gerard. "It is a phrase to be used only about a man who owns a silver mine. My income is fixed, and——"

"Limited," cried Jermyn, interrupting; "a decidedly limited income. Is it eighty or ninety thousand a year, or does it run to a hundred? I believe were I in your shoes I should be thinking about economising. I should have a holy horror of the workhouse. One loses all sense of proportion under the weight of two millions."

"There is a good deal of spending in it, certainly, if a man knows how to spend judiciously. Do you like my house?"

"I consider it perfect. You have had the discretion not to follow the prevailing fashion. That is your strong point. You have not gone too far, either, in expense or splendour. You have put on the brake at the right moment."

"Come and see my den," said Gerard.

He led the way to the upper floor, opened a door at the back of the house, and ushered Jermyn into a room with folding doors, opening into a

second room. The two rooms exactly reproduced those Inn chambers where he had seen the vision of Hester Davenport. Colour, form, material—all had been carefully copied, Gerard's memory of that night and its surroundings being more vivid than any other memory of his past life. There were the same curtains of sombre velvet, darkest green in the lights, and black in the shadows, the same Oriental carpet, of rich, but chastened, hues, the same, or almost the same, Italian pictures—a Judas by Titian—a wood-nymph by Guido, the same delicately-carved Chippendale secretaire and old oak cabinets, the same touches of colour amidst the gloom.

"My very rooms! by all that's wonderful!" cried Jermyn. "What a close observer of still life you must be. You have got everything—except me."

"The black marble bust? Yes, that is wanting; but I mean to have that before I have done."

"Well, my dear Hillersdon, imitation is the sincerest flattery, and I feel intensely flattered."

"A whim—a fancy that pleased me for a moment—that is all it means. Those after-

midnight hours in your chambers marked the turning-point in my life. I had made up my mind to shoot myself that very night. The pistol was ready loaded in my pistol-case. I had thought it all out, and had made up my mind. God knows how you guessed my secret so readily."

"My dear fellow, your mind was steeped in suicide. There was no secret in the matter—to an observer with the slightest claim to insight. I saw despair, defiance, recklessness, and the gloom which means only one thing—self-destruction."

"And while I was at the opera, listening to the doom of Don Juan, the everlasting type of spendthrift and profligate—while I was sitting in your chambers, the lawyer's letter was lying on my table, within a few feet of the pistol-case—the letter that heralded the announcement of millions. That night was like a bad dream—and it was not until many days afterwards that I was able to shake off that dream-feeling, and realise my good luck."

"Good luck, with a vengeance," laughed Jermyn. "You have been lucky in more ways than

one—lucky in love as well as in gold; lucky in the fast coming release of the woman you love."

"I don't quite follow you," Gerard said coldly, resenting this allusion, even from a man who professed to know everybody's business.

"Don't pretend to be angry with me for touching upon an open secret. Everybody knows of your devotion to one bright particular star; and everybody will be inclined to congratulate you when the worthy stockbroker gets his order of release. Life can be of very little value to him, poor fellow. I saw him dragged about in a bath-chair on the parade at St. Leonards a month ago, a dismal wreck, and now I am told he is in retreat at Finchley—the beginning of the end."

Gerard smoked his cigarette in silence. The conversation was evidently displeasing to him.

The beginning of the end? Yes, it might be that the end was near; and if it were so, what better could he desire than to marry the woman he had so ardently desired to marry just four years ago; the capable, accomplished woman whom all the town admired, and who was rich enough to be in no wise influenced by his wealth.

She was not less beautiful than she had been in her girlhood—more beautiful, rather, with a beauty which was only now ripening to its perfect development—a ruddier gold upon her hair, a finer curve of cheek and throat. People were never tired of telling him that Mrs. Champion was the handsomest woman in London.

"I want to ask you another question," Gerard began, when he had smoked out the cigarette. "Was I utterly mad that night in your rooms, or did I see a vision of a girl at a sewing-machine?"

"You were not mad by any means. Your conversation was both rational and logical. It is quite possible that you saw a vision."

"Produced by some trickery of yours, no doubt. How was it done?"

"If I were master of any of the black arts, do you think I would tell you the secrets of my trade? What if I willed that you should recall the loveliest face you had ever seen? Would that account for the phenomenon, do you think?"

"I don't know; the face was certainly one I had seen before; but I was quite unable to identify it without assistance, therefore one would

suppose it had faded out of my mind, and could hardly be willed into vivid actuality by you."

"You make no allowance for the submerged identity—that inner ego beneath the outer husk of existence—that hidden nature which keeps its fancies and thoughts locked in darkness, perhaps for years, to start into light at a touch of a kindred spirit—that mysterious being dormant in us from the dawn of manhood, which only awakens at the call of love, and which is at the root of that other mystery we call love at first sight—love, passionate, all-absorbing, strong as death, born in an hour."

"If not an Adam at his birth he is no love at all," quoted Gerard.

And then he remembered how in the beaten track of life his love of Edith Champion had grown up; how he had met her at dinners, and tennis-parties, and cricket matches, and afternoon teas, and had danced with her three nights a week, and heard her praised by men and women; until gradually, out of these commonplace elements he had come to think her the first necessity of his existence, and to follow her, and devote himself to her. No, there had been nothing

romantic there—no mysterious flame, wrapping him round in an instant, sudden, invincible. He loved as men and women love in what is called good society—reasonably, with a love that does not burst bonds, or even violate conventionalities.

He thought a good deal about Edith Champion during that April afternoon, long after Jermyn had left him, and when he was sauntering and dreaming alone in his little grove of lime and chestnut, where the purple leaf buds and newly opening leaves were faintly fanned by a soft west wind, and where, above the interwoven branches, the sky showed deeply blue—one of those peerless spring afternoons which bring with them, in their own fresh youthfulness, a sense of reviving youth in the frame and mind of man—factitious, but delightful while it lasts.

He thought of the woman to whom he had bound himself, and for the first time since he had given her his solemn promise of fidelity he felt the shadow of doubt creeping across that sunlit path which an indulgent Fate, granting him all things to be desired of man, had marked out for him. He told himself that he was one of the spoilt children of Fortune; and he hated

himself because, like the spoilt child of nursery story-books, he was inclined to quarrel with his toys.

He had been living amongst men whose master is the spirit that always denies. He had steeped himself in that pessimism of small minds which pervades society, and which is the chosen gospel of the men who profess to be in advance of their fellow-men. A dull, dead hopelessness came down upon him, like a dark cloud, in the midst of this palace of art which he had built for his soul, and the palace seemed no better than a prison-house.

He and Mrs. Champion had met less frequently during the last month, for Edith, who was warm-hearted and kindly natured, despite her essentially modern estimate of life, had deemed it her duty to withdraw in some measure from society, now that her husband was the inmate of a private lunatic asylum. She drove to Finchley three times a week, and spent an hour or two with the invalid, sometimes driving with him in the doctor's capacious landau, while her own horses rested, sometimes walking beside his wheel-chair in the garden, and listening

patiently while he rambled confusedly through the Stock Exchange list, from Berthas and Buenos Ayres First Preference to Electric Lighting Companies and Papafuego Loans; the shattered mind retracing trodden paths, and finding pleasure in familiar sounds, though memory was almost a blank. Mr. Champion was placable, satisfied with his surroundings, and expressed no impatience of restraint, nor desire to be taken back to his own house. Indeed, it seemed to his wife that he had forgotten every detail of his past existence, except the shibboleth of the Money Market.

In this dismal state it would have been less than charity to pray for the prolongation of his life. Edith did all in her power, by frequent supervision and by undeviating interest, to secure the patient's well-being. He had his old and trusted servant with him, as a check upon the service of the doctor's attendants. A wife who had loved him passionately could have done no more than Edith was doing.

CHAPTER XI.

"EARTH BEING SO GOOD, WOULD HEAVEN SEEM BEST?"

PERHAPS in every life there is one perfect interlude—one long sweet interval set somewhere in the midst of the cares and tribulations of commonplace existence, a period in which trouble and sorrow are unknown, and all the colours of earth and sky are deepened into supernatural beauty. The period of a young girl's engagement to the man of her choice—if she be only single-minded and free from jealous fears—is one of these halcyon days—a time of peace and happiness, the winds and waves of trouble all lying at rest, while the sea-birds, joy and hope, are hatching.

Lilian Hillersdon was steeped in the sunlight and the music of that enchanting time. The

man to whom she had plighted her life seemed to realise her highest ideal of manly excellence. He satisfied every need of her nature.

She was deeply religious, and she found in her future husband a faith that could apprehend and discuss every theory and doubt of the age, and yet stand strong as a tower. She was tender-hearted, benevolent, sympathetic, taking the sufferings of humanity as a portion of her own life, an ever-present sorrow in the midst of her own joy, and she found in John Cumberland a pity as tender as her own, and a benevolence of a far wider grasp. She could look up to him with meek reverence, as the women of old looked up to their mailed warriors, the men who went out to the unknown land to fight for the sepulchre of their Lord. She could revere him, and yet be utterly happy and light-hearted in his companionship, for his religion was, like Kingsley's, the gospel of cheerfulness, and his most ardent desire was to get the greatest sum of happiness out of this world for himself and others.

The one shadow on her life was the fact that her brother had wantonly shut himself outside

that fold where she would have gathered him, with all the precious things of her life; but when she told Jack Cumberland her fears and regrets, he smiled them away and comforted her with his broad view of a young man's foolishness.

"He is only going through that phase of unbelief which most men have to suffer at some period of their lives," he said. "He will not be prayed or preached into happier ideas. The best thing you and I can do is to leave him alone with his opinions till he finds out how barren and joyless this world is while it means the whole, and how much more comprehensible when we accept it for what it is—a single round upon the ladder of everlasting life. In the meantime, if we can interest him in philanthropic schemes, and the making of Christian England, we shall do a good deal."

"He has promised to make the round of our parish with mother next week," said Lilian.

Mrs. Hillersdon's much-talked-of visit to her son's house had been deferred from one cause and another until April was nearly over; but when that pleasant month was at its best she appeared upon the scene, fresh and smiling as

one of the glebe meadows on a sunny morning, and escorted by the Rector, who was to spend only three days in town, before returning westward to visit old friends, and to preach charity sermons at Stroud and at Bath on his way home.

The mother was full of admiration of her son's surroundings, and of the pretty rooms allotted to Lilian, in whose future home she was even more keenly interested. While the Rector was in London, the time was devoted to picture-galleries, concerts, the Park, and society, with the exception of a somewhat hurried survey of Mr. Cumberland's church, vicarage, and schools; but when Mr. Hillersdon had departed upon his round of visits, Lilian took complete possession of her mother, and most of their time was spent in the neighbourhood of Soho, both mother and daughter preferring the simple luncheon provided by Jack Cumberland's plain cook and middle-aged house-maid, in the sober oak-panelled dining-room in Greek Street, to the elaborate inventions of the *chef* at Hillersdon House. The mother was never tired of inspecting her daughter's future home, or of discussing

that important question of household linen, with all its scope for variety of material and fine sewing. Most delightful was it also to join Lilian and her lover in their rambles after furniture, books, and curios, wherewith to make the new home more and more homelike—the long drives to queer old brokers' shops to examine some gem of the Chippendale or Sheraton period, entangled in a dusty labyrinth of rubbish. It was curious how to these two women there was more real rapture in a couple of shield-backed chairs of the wheat-ear pattern, unearthed at a remote broker's, than in all the chastened splendour and carefully thought out luxury of Hillersdon House; indeed, there was to Mrs. Hillersdon's simple mind—chastened by long years of tranquil inactivity, sobered by the sorrows of a country parish—some latent feeling of distrust which saddened her in the midst of her son's brilliant surroundings. The change in his fortunes was too sudden and too intense. Unconsciously she echoed the foreboding of Solon when Crœsus exhibited his magnificence before the calm gaze of wisdom. She looked at her son, radiant, animated, leading the conversation at a table where all the

guests were men of mark, and all the women beauties or wits, and the flush upon his cheek seemed the hectic of disease, the light in his eye too restless for health. She questioned him with keenest anxiety after one of these brilliant dinners.

"Are you not doing too much, Gerard?" she asked tenderly, "burning the candle of life at both ends?"

"My dear mother, candles were made to burn. If one must be either a flame or a lump of tallow I would rather be the flame—though, no doubt, the unlighted tallow would last a great deal longer. I dare say we seem to be taking life prestissimo after your gentle andante movement in Devonshire. But a man who has no financial cares can stand a little racketing. I used to take a great deal more out of myself in the days when the thought of my tailor's bill, or the image of my landlord's sullen face scowling at me from the half-open door of his back parlour, would come between me and the roses and raptures of a Belgravian ball-room."

"But you have financial cares of another kind, Gerard," answered his mother, in her grave, sweet

voice. "You have the disposal of a great fortune—talents for which you must account by and by."

"At least, admit that I have not buried them in a napkin—unless it is a dinner napkin," laughed Gerard. "What did you think of that chaufroid of quails? commonplace, I fear; everybody gives quails at this season; the London *menu* becomes as monotonous as that of the Israelites in the wilderness; but the lobster soufflé was iced to perfection."

"Well, I won't try to talk seriously to you to-night; you will only laugh at my old-fashioned ideas. I was brought up to think of riches as something held in trust for one's fellow-creatures."

"You were brought up by the ideal squire and squiress. Yes, I remember my grandfather, who spent every sixpence he could spare from the mere bread and cheese of this life, upon building cottages for his farm labourers and improving the drainage of old-fashioned homesteads, and who was considered a tyrannical landlord by way of recompense—and my grandmother, who tramped up and down muddy lanes and penetrated foul-

smelling cabins, and dressed sore legs, and read to the sick and the blind, and was generally spoken of as an officious domineering person. Is that the kind of life you want me to lead, mother?"

"No, dear; that was charity upon a small scale, and under difficulties. You can do some great work."

"Only show me what there is for me to do, mother, and I will do it. There is Jack Cumberland yonder, who knows that my surplus income is at his service, but who is too proud to be helped, except in the most insignificant way. Shall I build him a church, or shall I endow an almshouse vast enough to hold all the elderly paupers in his parish? I am ready to give anything or to do anything. If I had any treasure specially dear to my heart, I would surrender it, as Polycrates threw his ring into the sea."

"Ah, dearest, I know your heart is in the right place," said the mother, drawing nearer to the low chair in which her son was reclining, his head lying back upon the amber cushions, his cheek pale with the exhaustion of an animated evening, "but I am grieved to think that in a

life which might be so happy—and so useful—there is one sad want."

"What is that, mother?"

"The want of religious convictions. Your sister tells me that you never go to church now, that Christ is no longer your master and your guide, but that you and your friends talk of our blessed Lord as a village philosopher in advance of his age, who unconsciously reproduced the aspirations of Plato, and the morals of Buddha. You used to be such a firm believer, Gerard, in the days when you came home from Eton, so fresh, and frank, and joyous, and when you and I used to have such long Sunday talks together in the woods between luncheon and evening service."

"Ah, mother, those were the days when life was a picture and not a problem; the days before I began to think. I dare say I shall be just as good a believer again by and by, when I am old enough to leave off thinking."

CHAPTER XII.

"FOR SUCH THINGS MUST BEGIN SOME DAY."

Mr. Cumberland's most energetic coadjutor in the improvement of his new parish was Lady Jane Blenheim, who had worked in that parish for many years, and who was the head and front of a club and home for working women, that stood almost within the shadow of the old church of St. Lawrence. Lady Jane had seen vicars and curates come and go. She had seen good and faithful shepherds; she had seen those who scarce knew how to hold a sheep-hook; and she was quick to recognise the right stamp of man in the new incumbent. She entered heartily into all his projected improvements, and gave the hand of friendship to his intended wife; while the Vicar on his side ardently espoused all the enthusiasms of the lady, and lent his musical

gifts to those social evenings at the club which it was Lady Jane's delight to inaugurate and superintend. To have as head of the parish a man with a strong brain and a fine baritone voice, supported by an extensive repertoire from both oratorio and opera, was more than she had ever hoped, and she gave the new Vicar her friendship and her counsel in unstinted measure. She was a familiar visitor in the dreariest ground-floor dens, and in the most miserable garrets within the district, and she could tell him a great deal about his neediest parishioners, who, although they frequently shifted from one wretched lodging to another, did not often wander far afield, indeed for the most part revolved within a narrow circle, keeping the old burial-ground of St. Lawrence as their centre, and the church tower as their land-mark, a land-mark which sometimes served to guide the feet of the Saturday night reveller, too far gone in liquor to read the names of the streets, or recognise minor indications.

To please his sister and her betrothed, Gerard interested himself in Lady Jane's club, and excused himself from an engagement at one of the most distinguished houses in London, where

hospitality was a fine art, and where Cabinet Ministers were as common as strawberries in July, in order to eat boiled salmon and roast lamb in Jack Cumberland's dining-room, where Lady Jane and his sister made up the party of four. His mother had gone back to Devonshire, satiated with the sights of London, and loaded with gifts from her millionaire son, costly trifles and new inventions for the comfort or decoration of drawing-room and morning-room, as yet unknown and undreamed of by the shopkeepers of Exeter.

He was not sorry to give up a ducal dinner-party, albeit his card of invitation bristled with Royalties. He had been tolerably familiar with all that London can offer in the way of pleasure and dissipation before he came into his fortune. He stood now upon a higher grade of the steps that approach the throne, but the palace was the same palace, the lights, music, flowers, lovely women were the same that he had looked upon for half a dozen seasons, when he was a nobody. He would have liked to have had a new world—to have had a gate open for him into a land where all things were new. If he had been able to walk more than half a dozen miles without

feeling tired, he would have started for Central Africa. He had serious thoughts of Japan, Ceylon, or even Burmah—but while an inner self yearned for untrodden lands, the commonplace, work-a-day self clung to Mayfair and its civilisation—to the great city in which for the man with any pretension to be "smart" there is only one hatter, one boot-maker, tailor, carriage-builder, one kind of letter-paper, one club, and one perfume possible; for be it observed that although the really smart man may be a member of twenty clubs there is only one that he considers worthy of him, that one from which the black ball has excluded the majority of his particular friends.

This little dinner in Soho, served by the neat parlour-maid, in the sombre oak-panelled parlour, this talk with Lady Jane of the ways and works of girls who made jam, and girls who made tailors' trimmings, was almost as good as a glimpse of a new country. All things here were new to the man who since he left the University had lived only amongst people who either were or pretended to be of the mode, modish.

The stories he heard to-night of sin and sorrow, good and bad, brutal crime, heroic effort, tender

self-sacrifice, in a world given over to abject poverty, with all the lights and shadows of these lowly lives, touched and interested him more than he could have supposed possible. His heart and his fancy had not been brought so near the lives of the masses since he read, with choking throat and tear-dimmed eyes, Zola's story of the lower deeps in that brilliant Paris of which he, Gerard Hillersdon, knew only the outward glitter and garish colouring. Behind the boulevards and the cafés, the theatres and the music halls, there is always this other world where everybody whose eyes open on the light of God's day is foredoomed a "lifer," sentenced to hard labour, and with but faintest hope of a ticket-of-leave after years of patient work. To Gerard, conscious of wealth in superabundance, these stories of sordid miseries, agonies which a five-pound note might cure, or fatal diseases, incurable for ever, which a little ease and a little comfort might have averted, seemed doubly dreadful—dreadful as a reproach to every rich man in the city of London. And yet to try and alter these things, he told himself, would be like trying to turn the tide of the St. Lawrence, above the falls of Niagara. Were he

to cast all his fortune into this great gulf of poverty, there would be one millionaire the less, and for the masses an almost imperceptible gain. But he resolved, sitting in this sombre parlour, with the sunset of a fine May evening glowing on the polished oak panels, as on deep water—he resolved that these stories of hard lives should not have been told him in vain—that he would do some great thing, when once he could decide upon the thing that was most needed—to lessen the measure of perpetual want. Whether lodging-house or hospital, club or refuge, reformatory or orphanage, something would he create; something which should soothe his own conscience and satisfy his mother's piety.

The dinner was all over before eight o'clock, and the little party left the Vicarage on foot to go to a hall in the neighbourhood which had been lent for a meeting of the choirs formed by the various women's clubs in London. The concert and competition had begun when the Vicar's party entered the lighted hall, and the building was crowded in every part; but seats had been kept for Mr. Cumberland and his friends in a central position in front of the platform.

The choirs were ranged in a semi-circle, like the spectators in a Greek theatre. There were eight choirs, numbering in all something over two hundred girls, and each choir wore a sash of a particular colour from shoulder to waist. These bright scarves across the sombre dresses, all following the same line, gave an appearance of uniformity to the whole costume. The eye hardly noted the dingy browns, or rusty blacks, the well-worn olives, or neutral greys of cheap, hard-wearing gowns. The bright faces, the neatly dressed hair—with its varied colouring, from raven black, through all the shades of brown and ruddy gold, to palest flaxen—the blue, and yellow, and green, and rose, and violet sashes filled the hall with life and colour.

Seen thus in a mass of smiling humanity the clubs of London seemed to have sent out a bevy of beauties. The general effect was excellent; and when all the voices burst forth in a great gush of melody, as the united choirs attacked Mendelssohn's "Greeting," Gerald felt the sudden thrill of sympathy which brings unbidden tears to the eyes.

After that burst of harmony, in which all the

choirs sang together, there came other part-songs by separate choirs. One of these by the members of a club at Chelsea, which called itself somewhat ambitiously the St. Cecilia, struck Gerard as a marked advance upon the others. They sang Schubert's "Wanderer," arranged as a part-song, with English words, and among the many voices there were tones of purest quality which went to Gerard Hillersdon's heart, and moved him more than the new tenors and much heralded sopranos from Italy, America, and Australia had been able to do of late. Indeed, there had been nights at the opera when he, who was passionately fond of music, had begun to fancy that he had left off caring for it; that one may get beyond music as one gets beyond so many other pleasures; that even to that pure and perfect enjoyment there may come a season of satiety.

To-night those familiar notes thrilled him; those fresh young voices pealing out over the crowded hall awakened in him a rapture of humanity, a longing to be one with this world of humble toilers, this world of struggles and of cares, in which the pleasures were so simple and so few. This was a gala night, no doubt, for all these

girls. To stand on yonder platform, to wear those bright-coloured sashes, and mingle their voices in tuneful harmonies, meant a festival. He thought of the girls he met in society, the girls steeped to the lips in worldliness and social intrigue; girls who calculated the cost of every entertainment, appraised its value, social and financial; sneered if the floral decorations at a ball were sparely done; sneered even more contemptuously when Transatlantic or newly-made wealth obtruded itself upon the eye in a too lavish magnificence; girls who were gourmets upon leaving the nursery, and who passed at once from the schoolroom bread and butter to a nice discrimination in quails, ortolans, and perigord pie; girls who went gaily flirting and dancing through the flowery groves of a London June, all freshness and infantine candour under the tempered incandescent lamps, yet having one eye always steadily directed to the main chance of an eligible husband and a handsome establishment.

While he idly philosophised, gazing somewhat dreamily at the wall of faces, rising in a semicircle in front of him, till the topmost rank seemed to touch the roof of the hall, his eye

suddenly fastened upon one face in the middle distance, a delicate and pensive face, far paler than the majority of those faces, though pallor is the predominant note in the complexions of London work girls. That one face, having once been perceived by him, shone out from the mass of faces, separate and distinct, and held his gaze. It was the face that had haunted his mind since that strange night in Justin Jermyn's chambers, the face of the girl at the sewing-machine. Line for line it was the face he had seen in a vision, distinct in its identity as the living face he was looking at to-night.

When the singing ceased he questioned Lady Jane, who sat next him.

"There is a girl in the Chelsea choir, a very lovely girl, but with a look of care in her face," he said. "Do you know who she is?"

"I think I know whom you mean. Can you point her out to me?"

He counted the rows and the heads, and indicated the exact position of the girl whose face attracted him.

"Do tell me what you know about her," he said earnestly.

"Very little. She is not in my parish or in my club. I believe she is a good girl. She lives with her father——"

"Who was once a gentleman and a scholar, but who is now nothing but a drunkard," interrupted Gerard.

"You know her then?" exclaimed Lady Jane.

"Is that her history?"

"I fear it is. She came once to a social evening at our club, and I talked to her, but she was very reticent, and it is from other girls I have heard the little I know of her story. The father was in the church, but disgraced himself by intemperate habits. The girl who told me this heard it from him, not from his daughter. Hester is a brave, good girl, and bears the burden of her father's past follies, and works very hard to maintain him in comfort. She is a very clever hand at braiding upon cloth. You may have noticed the braided gowns and jackets that have been worn of late years. Hester Dale does that kind of work for the fashionable tailors."

"Is it hand work or done by the sewing-machine?"

"The greater part is machine work. Hester is very expert—a really exquisite worker by hand or machine—but it is a hard life at best. I wish we could do more to brighten it for her. We could give her many little treats, and pleasant excursions in the country, if she could only forget that she is a gentleman's daughter, and mix with our girls upon an equal footing. She would find a good deal of natural refinement among them, common as their surroundings are. But she does not care to join in anything but the singing classes. Music is her only pleasure."

"Is not London a place of terrible temptations for so lovely a girl, under such adverse circumstances?" asked Gerard, in the pause that followed the next part-song, by an East End choir.

"Oh, Hester is not that kind of girl," answered Lady Jane, quickly; "she is too pure-minded to be approached by any evil influences."

Another choir burst into Mendelssohnic melody, "The Maybells and the Flowers," a choral song that sounded gay and fresh as May itself—and Gerard was again constrained to silence, but he never took his eyes from the pure oval of that

pale, pensive face, with its lovely violet eyes, full of a dreamy sweetness, gentle, trustful, innocent as the eyes of a child. Verily, this was a loveliness exempt from the snares and lures that lie in wait for vulgar beauty. A girl with such a face as that would not be easily tempted.

His mind went back to those two occasions upon which he had met Hester Davenport. He remembered that autumn afternoon at the Rectory, when he went into the drawing-room to bid Lilian good-bye, and found a strange young lady sitting with her—a young lady in a plain alpaca gown and a neat straw hat, and with the loveliest face he had seen for many a long day. He remembered the few words interchanged with the curate's daughter—the commonplace inquiries as to how she liked Hanover, and Hanover's ways and manners, and whether she had studied music or painting—and then a hurried adieu, as he ran off to the station. He remembered that other meeting by the sea, and a somewhat longer conversation—a little talk about her favourite walks, and her favourite books. He recalled the sweet face in its youthful freshness—fair as the face of the holy bride in Raffaelle's "Spozalizio"

—and then he thought of the girls he had known in the smart world, girls who had made magnificent marriages on the strength of a beauty less exquisite—who were now queens of society, treading lightly upon pathways strewn with the roses of life—worshipped, fêted, royal in their supremacy.

And it was just the starting point, the entourage that made all the difference. This girl might sit at her sewing-machine till her loveliness faded to the pale shadow of the beauty that has been.

He hardly heard the rest of the concert, though the voices were sufficiently loud. He was in a troubled dream of a life, which, after all, concerned him very little. What was Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba? Yet, in his eagerness to find out more about Hester Davenport he bade Lady Jane a hurried good night, and put his sister into her carriage to be driven home alone.

"I am going for a stroll in the moonlight," he said. "Don't sit up for me. I may go to my club for half an hour afterwards."

It was early yet, not quite ten o'clock, and the young May moon was shining over the chimneys

of Soho, a tempting night for a walk, and Gerard was given to nocturnal perambulations, so Lilian hardly wondered at being sent home alone."

He watched the brougham till it disappeared round a corner, and then watched the doors of the hall till the audience had all passed out, and had melted away into the infinite space of London; and then he watched the girls who composed the different choirs as they departed, mostly in talkative clusters, full of gaiety after the evening's amusement. Among so many girls, all dressed in much the same fashion, it was not an easy task to single out one—but his eye was keen to distinguish that one girl for whom he waited, as she crossed the street, separating herself from the herd, and walking rapidly westward, he following. She walked with the resolute pace of a woman accustomed to thread her way through the streets of a great city, uncaring for the faces that passed her by, unconscious of observers, intent on her own business, self-contained and self-reliant. Gerard Hillersdon followed on the opposite side of the way, waiting for some quieter spot in which he might address her. They walked in this fashion as far

as St. James's Park, and there, under the shelter of spring foliage, beneath Carlton House Terrace, he overtook and accosted her.

"Good evening, Miss Davenport. I hope you have not forgotten me—Gerard Hillersdon, son of the Rector of Helmsleigh?"

He stood bareheaded in the faint evening light—half dusk, half moonlight—holding out his hand to her; but she did not take the extended hand, and she was evidently anxious to pass on without any conversation with him.

"No, I have not forgotten—but I am hurrying home to my father. Good night, Mr. Hillersdon."

He would not let her go.

"Spare me a few minutes—only a few minutes?" he pleaded. "I won't delay your return. Let me walk by your side? My sister, your old friend Lilian, is living in London with me. She would like to call upon you if you will let her?"

"She was always kind—but it is impossible. My father and I have done with the world in which your sister lives. We are living very humbly, but not unhappily—at least, I have only

one anxiety, and that would be worse if we were living in a palace."

"Do you think my sister would value or love you less because you are working to maintain your father? Oh, Miss Davenport, you cannot think so meanly of an old friend?"

"No, no; I am sure she would be as kind as ever—but I would rather not see her. It would recall past miseries. I have tried to blot out all memory of my past life—to exist only in the present. I get on very well"—with a sad little smile,—"while I can do that. Please don't make it more difficult for me? Good night."

She stopped, and this time it was she who held out her hand in friendly farewell.

He took the poor little hand, so small, so delicately fashioned, in its shabby cotton glove—a grey cotton glove that had been washed and neatly darned. He took her hand, and held it gently, but with no intention of accepting his dismissal.

"Let me walk home with you?" he said. "I have so much to say to you."

"I would rather not. I am used to being alone."

"A part of the way—at least, just a little way? I want to tell you of all the changes that have happened since you left Helmsleigh."

"They cannot concern me. I tell you again I have done with all that life. I have no interest in it."

"Not even in my sister's fate? She was your friend."

"She was, and a very dear friend, but all that is past and gone. I want to know nothing about her, except that she is well and happy."

"She is both—happier than when you knew her. She is in that exalted condition of happiness which seems common to girls who are engaged to be married—curious when one considers their opportunities of appraising the joys of domestic life in the persons of their fathers and mothers."

"She is engaged?" mused Hester, forgetful at once of her resolve not to be interested, and all a woman in her quick sympathies. "Is her *fiancé* any one I knew at Helmsleigh?"

"No; he did not come to Helmsleigh until after you left. He succeeded your father as curate; but he is now in London. He is the

Vicar of St. Lawrence's. You may have seen him at Lady Jane's club."

"No; I very seldom go to the club. I give most of my leisure to my father."

"Mr. Davenport is pretty well, I hope?" inquired Gerard, hardly knowing how to avoid giving her pain in any allusion to her father.

"Yes, thank you. He has tolerable health; only—there is no use in hiding it from you—there is always the old trouble to fear. It does not come often, but it is a constant fear."

"He is not cured? He still gives way to the old temptation?"

"Sometimes. He is very good. He struggles against that dreadful inclination; but there are times when it is stronger than himself. He fought a hard battle with himself while we were in Australia—tried to gain his self-respect and the respect of his fellow-men. He succeeded in getting profitable employment as a clerk. We were doing quite well; but the evil hour came. He was tempted by foolish friendly people, who laughed at my anxieties about him—and—the end was madness. He was dismissed from the office where he was a gentleman and a person

of importance, with a good salary, and he was glad to drop into a lower form of employment; and he sank and sank to almost the lowest in the city of Melbourne. His friends ceased to care for him. They called him irretrievable. So then I took the care of his life upon my own shoulders. I was able to earn a little money by giving lessons in a depôt for sewing-machines, where I learnt a good many improvements in machine work—improvements that are not yet common in England—and I saved just enough to pay our passage home—a steerage passage. I brought him home, a sad wreck, hopeless, broken in body and mind, and we found lodgings in Chelsea—very cheap and very humble, but clean and wholesome. A distant relation of my father's pays the rent. We have lived there ever since. I thought at first that I should be able to find pupils for the pianoforte or singing, and that my German education would help me in that way; but I found very soon how hopeless that is, especially when one is living in a poor neighbourhood and wearing a threadbare gown. And then I was lucky enough to discover a mantle-maker in Knightsbridge who wanted

what is called a braiding hand, and as my knowledge of the latest sewing-machine enabled me to do this kind of work better than most girls, I soon got regular employment, and I have been able to make my living ever since."

"A poor living and a hard life, I fear," said Gerard.

"Oh, we have enough. We are just comfortable, father and I; and he is so fond of me and so good to me that I ought to be thankful and happy."

"And have you no recreation, no variety in your existence? Is it all hard work?"

"I have the choir practice. That makes a little change now and then, only I don't like to leave my father too often."

"Does he do nothing?"

"He reads the papers at the free library, and in fine weather he does a little gardening."

"But he does nothing to help you—he earns nothing?"

"No, he is past all that. If he could earn money evil would come of it. As it is his pockets are always empty, poor dear, and he cannot pay for the dreadful stuff that would

madden his brain. Brandy and chloral cost money, luckily for him and for me."

"Will you let Lilian help you?" asked Gerard. "We are rich now, ridiculously rich. We hold our wealth in trust for all who need it. Let my sister do something to make your life lighter. She shall put a sum of money into the Knightsbridge Bank to your credit, open an account for you, and you can draw the money as you want it. She shall do that to-morrow. Consider the thing done."

"Do not dream of it, Mr. Hillersdon," she answered indignantly. "I would never touch a sixpence of any such money. Do you suppose I would take alms from you or any one else while I am young and strong, and am able to get regular work? I wonder you can think so poorly of me."

"I wonder you can be so cruel as to refuse my friendship—for in refusing my help you deny me the privilege of a friend. It is mere stubbornness to reject a small share in Lilian's good fortune. I tell you again we are absurdly rich."

"If you were twice as rich as the richest of

the Rothschilds I would not sacrifice my independence. If I were penniless and my father ill the case might be different. I might ask your sister to help me."

"And must I do nothing to lighten your burden, to soften your hard life?"

"It is not a hard life. It is the life of thousands of girls in this great city—girls who are contented with their lot, and are bright and happy. I am luckier than many of them, for my work is better paid."

"But you were not born to this lot!"

"Perhaps not; but I hardly think that makes it any worse to bear. I have lived the life long enough to be accustomed to it."

They were in Eaton Square by this time, the long and rather dreary square, with its tall, barn-like church, which even Fashion cannot make beautiful. When they were about halfway between the church and the western end of the square Hester stopped abruptly.

"I must beg you to come no further," she said, and there was a resolute look in the pale proud face under the light of the street lamp that commanded obedience.

"Good night, then," he said moodily. "You will at least tell me where you live?"

"No there would be nothing gained. My father and I wish to be forgotten."

She hurried away from him, and he stood there in moonlight and gaslight, in the dull level square, thinking how strange life is.

Should he follow her and find out where she lived? No; that would be a base and vulgar act, and he might obtain her address without that sacrifice of self-respect and risk of her contempt. He could find out at the club, of whose choir she was a member. She fancied herself safely hidden under her assumed name, no doubt; but he had heard that alias from Lady Jane, and it would be easy enough to discover the dwelling-place of Hester Dale.

He walked home melancholy, and yet elated. He was so glad to have found her. It seemed as if a new life were beginning for him that night.

He did not go to any of the haunts which invite the footsteps of youth betwixt midnight and morning. Dancing tempted him not, neither music nor cards. He was out of tune with all

such common amusements, and the commonplace emotions which they produce. He felt as Endymion felt after the mystery of the cavern; felt as if in that walk in the dim evening shadows and in the bright moonlight he had been in another world, and now was back in the old world again, and found it passing dull.

All was silent in his house when he went in, but through an open window in the lofty hall a chilling wind crept in and stirred the palm leaves, and awakened weird harmonies in an Æolian harp that hung near the casement. His favourite reading-lamp was burning on the table in his study, that room which owed its existence to Justin Jermyn's taste rather than his own, and was yet in all things as his own taste would have chosen.

The valet who was waiting up for him received his orders and retired, and as his footsteps slowly died away in the corridor, Gerard Hillersdon felt the oppression of an intolerable solitude.

There were letters on a side table. Of all the numerous deliveries in the district none ever failed to bring a heap of letters for the millionaire—invitations, letters of introduction, begging

letters, circulars, prospectuses of every imaginable mode and manner of scheme engendered in the wild dreams of the speculator. He only glanced at these things, and then flung them into a basket which his secretary cleared every morning. His secretary replied to the invitations; he had neatly engraved cards expressive of every phase of circumstances—the pleasure in accepting—the honour of dining—the regret in declining—and all the rest. The chief thing which money had done for Gerard Hillersdon was to lessen the labour of life—to shunt all his burdens upon other shoulders.

This is what wealth can do. If it cannot always buy happiness, it can generally buy ease. It seems a hard thing to the millionaire that he must endure his own gout, and that he cannot hire some one to get up early in the morning for him.

Among all the letters which had accumulated since six o'clock, there was only one that interested him, a long letter from Edith Champion, who had the feminine passion for writing lengthily to the man she loved, albeit of late he had rarely replied in any more impassioned form than a telegram.

"It is so much nicer to talk," he told her when she reproached him, "and there is nothing to prevent our meeting."

"But there is. There are whole days on which we don't meet—my Finchley days."

"True. But then we are so fresh to each other the day after. Why discount our emotions by writing about them? I love to get your letters, all the same," he added kindly. "Your pen is so eloquent."

"I can say more with my pen than I ever dare to say with my lips," she answered.

Her letter to-night was graver than usual.

"I have been at Finchley all day—such a trying day. I think the end is coming—at least, the doctors have told me they do not give him much longer. I cannot say I fear he is dying, since you know that his death will mean the beginning of a new existence for me, with all the hope and gladness of my girlhood; and yet my mind is full of fear when I think of him and of you, and of what my life has been for the last three years. I do not think I have failed in any duty to him. I know that I have never thwarted him, that I have studied his

wishes in the arrangement of our lives, have never complained of the dull people he brought about me, or refused to send a card to any of his city friends. If he had objected to your visits I should have given up your acquaintance. I have never disobeyed him. But he liked to see you in his house; he never felt the faintest pang of jealousy, though he must have known that you were more to me than any common friend. I have done my duty, Gerard; and yet I feel myself disgraced somehow by those three years of my married life. I was sold like a slave in the market-place, and though such bargains are the fashion nowadays, and everybody approves of the market and the barter, yet a woman who has consented to be bought by the highest bidder cannot feel very proud of herself in after life. It is nearly over, Gerard, and by and by you must teach me to forget. You must give me back my girlhood. You can, and you only. There is no one else who can—no one—no one."

He sat brooding, with that letter open before him. Yes, he was bound as fast as ever man was bound—bound by every obligation that could

constrain an honest man. Conscience, feeling, honour alike constrained him. This was the woman to whom he gave his heart four years ago, in the fresh morning of a young man's life—in that one bright year of youth when all pleasures, hopes, and fancies are new and vivid, and when the feet that tread this workaday earth move as lightly as if they wore Mercury's pinions. What a happy year it had been! What a bright, laughing love! Though he might look back now and sneer at his first love as commonplace and conventional, he could but remember how sunny the world had been, how light his heart, how keen his enjoyment of life in those thoughtless days—before he had learnt to think! Yes; that had been the charm of existence—he had lived in the present. He must try to live in the present now—to look neither backward nor forward—to enjoy, as the butterflies enjoy—without memory, without forecast.

He had not forgotten the opening chapter of the "Peau de Chagrin"—the dismal centenarian in the bric-à-brac shop, the man with a face like a death's head, the dreary stoic who had existed for a hundred years, and yet had never lived.

He had the novel on the table before him—an *édition de luxe*, richly illustrated, with duplicate engravings on India paper. The story had a curious fascination for him, and he could not rid himself of the idea that the consumptive Valentin was his own prototype. In a curious fanciful indulgence of this grim notion, he had nailed a large sheet of drawing-paper on the panelled wall that faced his writing-table. He had no enchanted skin to hang on the white paper, to indicate by its gradual contraction the wasting of his own life—the hurrying feet of Death; but he had invented for himself a gauge of his strength and nervine vitality. Upon the elephantine sheet he had drawn with a bold and rapid pen the irregular outline of an imaginary chagrin skin, and from time to time he had drawn other lines within this outline, always following the original form. In the steadiness and force of the line his pen made he saw an indication of the steadiness of his nerves, the soundness of his physical health. Of the five lines upon the white paper the innermost showed weakest and most uncertain. There had been a gradual deterioration from the first line to the fifth.

To-night, after a long interval of melancholy thought, he rose suddenly, dipped a broad-nibbed pen deep into a capacious ink-pot, and with slow uncertain hand traced the sixth line—traced it with a hand so tremulous that this last line differed more markedly from the line immediately before it than that fifth line differed from the first bold outline. Yet between the first and the fifth line there had been an interval of nearly six months, while between the fifth and the sixth the interval was but three days.

The element of passion, with its fever of hope and expectancy, had newly entered into his life.

END OF VOL. I.

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